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*CHIPSTEAD OF THE LONE HAND*

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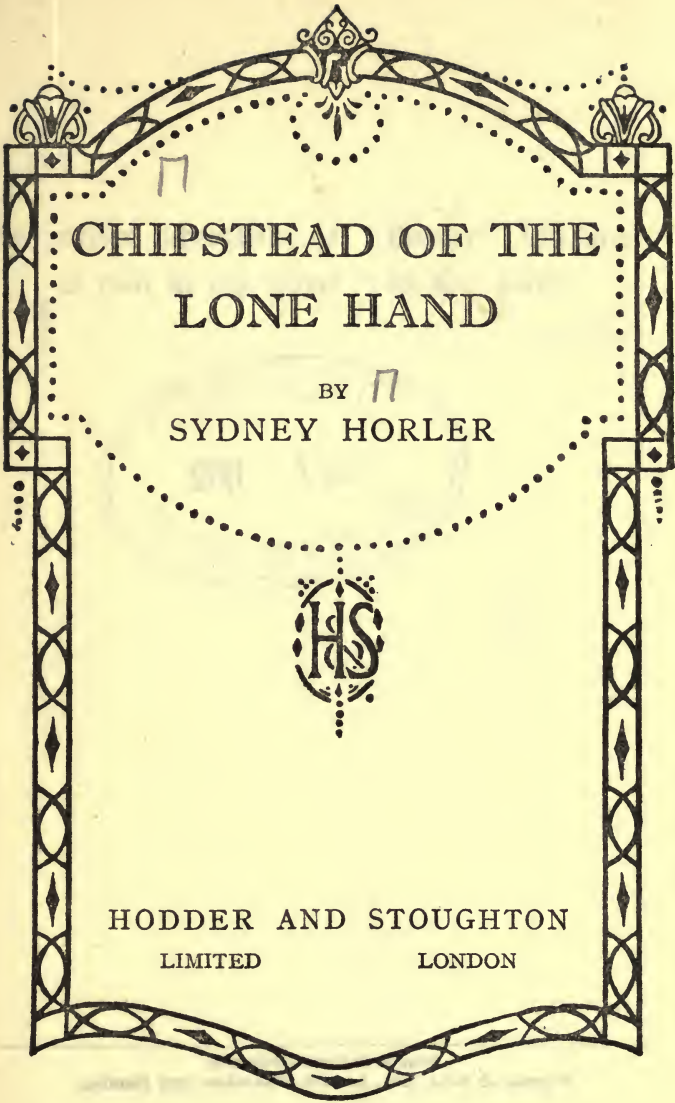


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SYDNEY HORLER


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*The Worst Man in the World*  
*Chipstead of the Lone Hand*  
*The Curse of Doone*  
*Miss Mystery*  
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*The Black Heart*  
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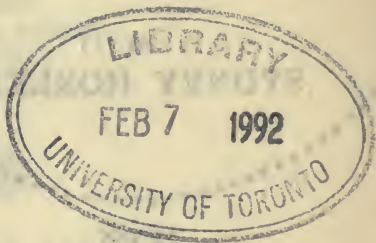


CHIPSTEAD OF THE  
LONE HAND

BY   
SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
LIMITED LONDON



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*Printed in Great Britain by  
Wyman & Sons, Ltd., London, Fakenham and Reading.*



An earlier adventure of "Bunny" Chipstead  
as told in my novel "In the Dark."

—S.H.

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TO  
C. E. LINGLEY  
(not forgetting "The Guv'nor")

Best  
of  
Secretaries

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CHIPSTEAD was taking his turn in the queue lined up outside the ship's bank when the radiogram was brought to him.

"Wireless—just received, sir," said the steward.

Occupied by the thought of the business in Paris, he naturally concluded that the message must be from his sister, to straighten out whose legal affairs he was proceeding straight to the French capital after landing at Cherbourg early the following morning. The result was that he opened the envelope straightaway without leaving his place in the queue.

*Come London Immediately. Vital.*

HEDDINGLY.

Any request signed by that name would have had a peculiar significance, but the word "vital" caused him to forget temporarily everything about Paris, and to concentrate on what could have caused his friend Sir Robert Heddingly to send a message of this urgent description.

Sir Robert and he were old comrades-in-arms. They had worked together, officially and otherwise, for a number of years. He had dropped Heddingly a note from the Plaza during his stay in New York, informing him of his new movements—how, owing to a cablegram from his sister, he intended to return to Europe on the *Aquitania* instead of the *Mauretania*, and that before he could look him up in London, he must make a trip to Paris.

He had not seen Heddingly for about nine months, owing to his having been in the States. Occasional letters had passed between them, and he had looked forward eagerly to dining with the British Secret Service Chief and exchanging news.

This unexpected summons was puzzling.

“My dear sir, I really beg your pardon!”

A hand caught his shoulder. But for this help, he might have lost his balance, for a heavy weight had pushed itself into his back. He turned to see the apologetic face of the Rev. Ambrose Paignton.

“I wasn’t aware you were standing behind me, Mr. Paignton.” His tone was inclined to be curt.

From the first day out of New York this well-groomed, suave-mannered, carefully-dressed English cleric had devoted considerable attention to cultivating his acquaintance. An expansive soul himself, Paignton evidently delighted in knowing the business of other



people. The fellow was agreeable enough, but Chipstead, by instinct discriminating, had never really taken to the man. Paignton was inclined to be rather smug. It was natural, he supposed, that a clergyman should be guarded in his criticisms, but the Rev. Ambrose Paignton had a good word for *everyone*. This was irritating. Chipstead's experience of life—a pretty extensive one—was that a man who held such ultra-generous views was either a fool or a knave. It was uncharitable in view of his cloth to imagine that the Rev. Ambrose Paignton belonged to the latter category, and yet. . . . Well, he had certainly materialised in a mysterious and quite unlooked for way, and the collision might have been due to his craning forward in the endeavour to read the wireless message.

The Rev. Ambrose was ready with an explanation.

“I decided to change my American money into English. How wonderfully they arrange things on these big liners nowadays. Imagine an actual bank on board—the enterprise! When I return home to Little Bampton—by the way, my dear Mr. Chipstead, I shall be delighted—more than delighted—if you could find time to drop in at the Vicarage any time—I think I will give a lecture on the wonders of Cross-Atlantic travel. It is my first trip out and back, you know, and I have been absolutely amazed . . . amazed!”

The speaker's face glowed with the warmth of his enthusiasm. Tiny beads of perspiration actually showed on his nose beneath the gold-mounted, thick-lensed spectacles.

"No doubt your parishioners would find it very interesting." Chipstead decided that he must have a prejudice against clergymen; in any case he could not like this one.

"You think so?" The Rev. Ambrose Paignton burred. "You really think so? It is most kind of you to say that because during the last few delightful days I have grown to respect your opinions very highly, Mr. Chipstead. I don't mind confessing that sermons are not exactly—how shall I put it? will you forgive a modern idiom?—my strong point, and I endeavour to repair this sad deficiency by giving a series of lectures dealing with popular subjects during the winter months. What do you think of 'Life on an Atlantic Liner' for a title?"

"Quite good, I should say," replied Chipstead, moving up. There were now only two men between him and the bank-clerk. The ordinary person might have been patient with this artless prattler, he supposed, but, strange as the feeling was, he could not rid his mind of the impression that the Rev. Ambrose Paignton occupied himself with rather more absorbing subjects than dilating to a bunch of dull-witted English villagers about the amenities of modern Atlantic travel.

Paignton was not an ordinary cleric. For one thing, the average English country vicar could not afford to travel first-class. Then he remembered that the man had explained he had recently been left a "modest legacy" by a "distant cousin," and that he had decided to devote a third of the sum to indulging in a long-cherished wish to see the wonders of New York. "A city given over-much, I am afraid, to the pleasures of the senses—but who am I to judge my fellow-creatures?"

The bank-clerk had dealt expeditiously with the two men in front, and Chipstead stepped forward.

He briefly reflected.

"I want some English money, please," he said, placing a roll of dollar bills on the counter, "£100."

"Yes, sir."

The exchange was quickly made.

Nodding to the clergyman, Chipstead walked away. But he was not to escape so easily. The pertinacious Paignton, anxious, no doubt, to do good wherever and whenever possible, penetrated into the quiet corner of the smoking-room where Chipstead had entrenched himself, and re-commenced his interminable gossip.

"So you have changed your mind, Mr. Chipstead? You are not leaving us at Cherbourg? I am very glad." The speaker's round, clean-shaven face was a picture of benevolent interest. "I should imagine that

it is rather a melancholy experience saying good-bye to the friends one has made on ship-board." Perhaps because his companion commenced to stare at him rather bleakly, he hastened to give the explanation he considered necessary. "You mustn't think me unduly inquisitive, but living the quiet, humdrum existence I do in a very secluded village, I have developed an abnormal interest in the doings of certain of my fellow-men. When I say 'certain,' I mean, of course, those who appeal particularly to me. That is why I commented mentally on the fact that, although you had previously mentioned to me that you were leaving us at Cherbourg and proceeding to Paris, you changed your American money not into French but into English currency. No doubt the wireless message caused you to alter your mind?"

The expression on his companion's face became even more bleak, but the Rev. Ambrose Paignton, having no suspicion of his fellow-men himself, evidently did not entertain the idea that any one could possibly think wrong of him. He continued to beam benevolently, if somewhat fatuously, upon his listener.

Chipstead knocked out the ashes of his pipe.

"My business often causes me to change my plans, Mr. Paignton." Rising, he softened the brusqueness of the reply with: "See you at dinner." Then he walked rapidly away.

During the time the talkative cleric had been boring him, he was coming to two decisions. The first was that he must not fail Heddingly, who was not the type to send a message of that sort without some very adequate reason. The second was that he would arrange for Ross-Smith, his London lawyer, to go to Paris in his place. After all, if there had been any shady business on the part of Tellou, the French stockbroker, a lawyer was the man to deal with the affair. Ross-Smith would be much more the chap for the job than himself, and, directly he had seen Heddingly, he would fulfil his promise to Norah and cross the Channel. He preferred London to Paris, but he could not fail the old girl. In the meantime, he would send off some radios.

It was whilst writing out the first—the reply to the urgent summons to London—in the outer room of the Cunarder's splendidly-equipped wireless offices that he stopped, pencil poised over the paper. It was curious that Heddingly should have put his name to that message. So close were their relations that they always signed their cabled communications by a nickname. Thus he was "Rameses," whilst Heddingly was "Ulysses." There was something more than a joke behind this: in the past, when separated, there had often been the most urgent reasons why what they sent to each other should be kept secret. And then Chipstead had a second misgiving: If it was

all that important, Bob would surely have sent the message in code. It was queer. Still, nothing could be done until he reached London.

"Get these off as quickly as possible, please," he said to the assistant-operator.

"They'll be going off straightaway, sir." Glancing at the signature at the end of the third message, the one in which Chipstead had instructed Ross-Smith to go to Paris as soon as possible, the man added: "There's another radio arrived for you, Mr. Chipstead." He turned back to his desk and handed over an envelope.

"Thank you."

This time Chipstead waited until he was standing alone. Although the man was not visible, he had an uncanny feeling that the Rev. Ambrose Paignton might be hovering in the vicinity.

*Will call at your rooms to-morrow night.  
Vital.*

HEDDINGLY.

Again that highly-charged, significant "Vital." What was possessing Bob? Had he lost his grip? It certainly was very unlike him to be screeching into the ether in this fashion. And this wireless, like the first, had not been sent from London, but from a place called Bournemouth.

The dressing-gong reverberating through the ship, made him turn towards his stateroom.

He changed quickly, and took the opportunity to have a turn on deck. Wonderful weather had made the voyage more than usually enjoyable, and, although it was now mid-November, the air had only sufficient nip in it to cause one's skin gently to tingle.

He walked quickly. He was in that kind of mood. A sense of vague excitement possessed him. The sensation was familiar, although it was some months since he had last experienced it. Unless his usually reliable intuition was at fault, he was about to engage upon another job.

His last thought before dropping off to sleep that night was to wish that it was possible to charter an aeroplane from the middle of the English Channel. That signature "Heddingly" worried him.

## CHAPTER II

## THE ADVENTURER

THE reversing of the ship's engines at four o'clock the following morning when the liner dropped mails and passengers into the Cherbourg tenders, woke him as it did every one else in the ship. Chipstead possessed that rare but fortunate

quality which ensured him receiving satisfactory service wherever he was. Servants of all kinds delighted to fetch and carry for him; they smiled on Chipstead when they would have frowned on another man.

Even at 4.10 a.m. his bedroom steward hastened to do his bidding.

"Can I have some tea, Bartlett? I shan't be able to sleep again. I'll go on deck."

"Certainly, sir." The tray was deposited with that inevitable parting phrase of all Cunard Atlantic ship's stewards: "All right."

Chipstead, sipping his tea, reverted to the subject which had been nearest his mind the night before. The *Aquitania* would berth at Southampton about ten o'clock. There would be the usual and inevitable two hours' delay, no doubt, getting passports stamped and mooning about heaven knew for what, but the boat train would be waiting and he would be in London a couple of hours afterwards.

He startled the bathroom steward by appearing for a plunge at an unheard-of hour, and then, dressed in tweeds, he sought the deck. He was not altogether surprised to find the Rev. Ambrose Paignton another early-riser.

"Ah! Unable to sleep like myself, Mr. Chipstead?" chirruped the vicar of Little Bampton, Hunts. "If I should not have the delight of seeing you again, let me take this opportunity of expressing the very real pleasure



which your companionship on this voyage has given me. And you will not forget to look me up if ever you are my way? Now don't forget: The Rev. Ambrose Paignton, The Vicarage, Little Bampton, Hunts."

"I won't forget, Mr. Paignton." Accepting the out-held hand, Chipstead felt that the eyes which appeared so innocent behind the spectacles were watching him very intently. Was it to ascertain for himself whether he left the ship after all at Cherbourg that the Rev. Ambrose Paignton had abandoned the comfort of his berth at this uncomfortable hour? Perhaps, after all, he was being absurdly suspicious. It might only be a harmless curiosity—the desire to see everything which was going on—that had induced Paignton to be so early astir. And yet—the thought, however absurd, persisted.

The last hours spent on board are the longest of any voyage. Southampton was reached at ten o'clock, but it was nearly noon before Chipstead walked down the gangway to find his luggage waiting under initial "C" to pass the Customs. Back behind, the last good-byes were still being said; the ship's officers were shaking hands with special favourites among the passengers; the final scenes so familiar to an experienced traveller were being enacted.

Twenty minutes later he was seated in a corner-seat of a first-class smoking compartment of the London boat express. He had a feeling

of irritation; the boorishness of a Customs official had been extremely annoying. The crying of a Smith's news-boy laden with a tray of magazines and other reading matter on the platform outside came as a distraction to his thoughts. It was only after he had made his purchases and was waiting for the lad to give him change, that he saw a familiar figure on the platform.

It was the Rev. Ambrose Paignton, and the vicar of Little Bampton, Hunts., acknowledged the recognition with a smile.

Paignton started to hasten forward, but the train commencing to move, Chipstead pretended not to notice the manœuvre, and withdrew his head. Just before the express got into its stride, he had a second glimpse of his fellow-voyager. This time the Rev. Ambrose Paignton's expression seemed to have lost its characteristic benevolence. In some strange way the man's face had changed.

Chipstead looked about him with an appreciative eye. This room of his, with its elegant furnishing and solid comfort, was a kindly sight for a traveller. It represented one of modern civilisation's achievements, for it had been planned and fashioned by a sophisticate.

It held a deep serenity, a gracious peace. The only sound allowed to drift in through the heavy curtains was the subdued murmur of

the afternoon traffic in St. James's street below. Situated in the very heart of London, it made a very desirable *pied-à-terre*. Chipstead had a flat in Paris, an apartment in New York, but this London bachelor's den was his favourite resting-place.

Brooks, his valet-butler, whose pontifical poise suggested there had been an Archbishop at some time in the family, greeted him with the aloof respect which Chipstead found so amusing, and after placing a pile of letters on the small table by the side of the easy chair, waited for orders.

"Tea, Brooks—and I am expecting Sir Robert Heddingly. When he comes, show him in at once."

"Yes, sir."

Chipstead had become sufficiently an Englishman to promote tea-drinking to one of the finer arts. After six months in America, it was good to see Brooks perform the ceremony with the due and proper ritual.

It was the fitting time for tea—four o'clock on a November afternoon. Dusk had not yet come, but Brooks had drawn the curtains and turned one electric switch. This, with the glow from the logs crackling on the wide hearth, gave just the proper light.

Chipstead sipped his first cup.

"Excellent tea, Brooks."

It could not be said that the servitor unbent, but there was a faint hint of warmth in his tone

as he replied: "I am pleased to hear you say so, sir."

"It is almost impossible to get a good cup of tea in America, Brooks."

"Really, sir? The American nation are much given to the drinking of coffee, I understand, sir."

"Yes. Oh, yes . . . I can manage all right now."

Brooks wheeled with ponderous effect.

"Very good, sir." The door closed discreetly.

Chipstead quietly chuckled as he bit into a toasted tea-cake. Brooks had not changed—he never would change. So far as any human emotion was concerned, the man might have been a walking monument. He was excellent at his work, but Chipstead had never been able to rid himself of the idea that the man nurtured a secret contempt for his employer. Brooks at one time had been in the service of Lord Coxhaven, that famous British peer whose aloof manner had earned him the nickname of "Chilly Coxhaven." Contact with this human iceberg may have frozen his blood—turned him into the passionless automaton he was at present.

Many times Chipstead had been inclined to send the fellow going—the man's unreasonable inhumanity had got on his nerves—but each time he had changed his mind. Brooks represented a challenge. A challenge because

others who served him generally seemed to find pleasure in the job—the allegiance of some amounted almost to a personal friendship—and he was determined to try to beat down Brooks' defences. There was also the chance that if he got rid of the man he would never find another servant so mechanically efficient.

Tea finished, he lit a pipe and commenced a leisurely inspection of the room. There were many things which recalled memories—some fiercely-pulsating, some sad, some joyous. Life during the last fifteen years had been anything but humdrum for the man the world knew as Bunny Chipstead.

This was perhaps only natural in the case of an individual whom every one that had the privilege of his close acquaintance—a very select number—agreed was one of the most remarkable men in London.

Chipstead had once been described as a modern d'Artagnan. In one respect the comparison might be allowed to pass since Chipstead never allowed the thought of personal danger unduly to impress him, but he was far more level-headed than the impetuous Gascon, although belonging to the small army of present-day adventurers. A Secret Service free-lance—a man who worked for the sheer thrill of the game, and who would never consent to receive a penny in payment—he was so high in the regard of both the American and British

Intelligent organisations, that he was frequently called in as an expert when some especially delicate and dangerous matter had arisen.

At first glance Chipstead might have been taken for a soldier of fortune come into a rich inheritance, or a big game hunter home on holiday after completing a hazardous trip. As a matter of fact, he was a little of both. He had soldiered in many countries, while the big game he had hunted had included many men who were more desperate than any wild beast. His clean-cut face had a wind-swept, bleak expression, but was redeemed from utter grimness by humorous, very keen, grey eyes. He was tanned almost to a leather hue; he weighed exactly 135 pounds, could use his fists or a revolver with equal facility—and owed his nickname of Bunny to a curious circumstance.

Chipstead had had an American father and an English mother. His father, Samuel P. Chipstead, had worked his way up from a mechanic's bench to be a famous maker of motor-cars.

It was out of compliment to his English wife that the motor-car manufacturer had named his only child Buncombe after Edith Knowleton's favourite brother.

After many rough passages at school, the derisive "Bunkum" had become an affectionate "Bunny"—and "Bunny" it had remained.

Chipstead had drifted first into the hazardous "game" of Intelligence during the War. He

had shown such aptitude and natural skill that afterwards he had adopted the suggestion made to him that he should become a free lance of the American Secret Service. At Washington and elsewhere he had made the acquaintance of some highly-placed officials of England's Intelligence Department, and, with one of these at least, Sir Robert Heddingly, he had struck up a firm friendship. They were men of much the same type, although Sir Robert was chained to a desk while Chipstead was essentially a man of action.

Blessed with an ample fortune and with absolutely no ties, Bunny travelled extensively, executing delicate commissions, not only for the American, but for the British Government, working, as has been said, for the love of the job alone. He had a highly developed flair for this sort of thing, and the secret files of the two capitals testified to his many successes. There was only one stipulation Bunny always made: He had to work entirely on his own, and refused to be fettered by any official rules.

In that room were many trophies of the "chase." He picked one up now. It was a silver cigarette-box, a gift from the man whose step he was expecting to hear any minute. On the inside of the lid was an inscription:

*To*

*Bunny*

*From*

*Bob.*

Putting it gently aside, he went back to his leather chair by the fire. His pipe had gone out and he made no attempt to re-light it. Memories thronged his mind. It was curious how things should repeat themselves in this way. About a year ago he had been engaged on the Jarvis Stark business. A peculiar affair centring round a criminal Deputy Commissioner of Scotland-yard who was subsequently proved to be mad. Bob Heddingly, at his wits' end, had called him in. He had been fortunate enough to clear up the mess and put things straight for the British Secret Service Chief.

He looked at his watch. Five o'clock. He wished Heddingly would come. He could telephone, of course, but the chances were that Bob would be away from his office. The second wireless had stated that he would call at St. James's street. That was definite enough.

When another hour had passed—part of which time he had occupied in consulting the current copy of Crockford and discovering that the present incumbent of Little Bampton (Hunts) was named Ambrose Paignton—a fact which for some reason did not give him any satisfaction—Chipstead walked to the telephone. Giving a number which was not to be found in the excellent directory issued to all subscribers by the London Telephone Service, he waited impatiently for the connection.



“Sir Robert Heddingly,” he said, when a crisp voice at the other end of the wire asked, “Yes?”

The reply, instantly given, was not surprising.

“The gentleman in question is out of town.”

Immediately came the sound of the receiver being replaced on its hook.

This information, abrupt as it was—but he could understand that—merely confirmed Chipstead’s own view of the situation; otherwise he would not have been content. But he knew Heddingly. When Sir Robert stated that he would call at an address, it meant that nothing short of an earthquake would prevent him doing so. Once again he settled himself to wait.

It was half an hour later that he heard the ring. He jumped up. Now he would know.

But when the door opened, it was not Sir Robert who stepped into the room.

“Miss Susan Courtenay,” announced Brooks. The effect on Chipstead, usually so self-contained and imperturbable, was remarkable. It was as though a flame—a flame which he endeavoured unsuccessfully to extinguish—had been lit inside him.

One glance he took, and then he knew that all this futile attempts to shut Susan Courtenay out of his life had been merely a ridiculous waste of time. Fool!

This girl followed the mode in being slender, but her body was exquisitely rounded. Beneath the small, close-fitting black hat, her face took on the tender fragility of a flower. Auburn curls strayed on to cheeks the colour of pure ivory. Her eyes were like violets wet with the dawn; she had the shapeliest nose that ever adorned a human face and the very sight of her mouth made Chipstead's head reel. Susan Courtenay, Sir Robert Heddingly's adopted daughter, was to him the loveliest creature God had ever made, and from the first day he had seen her, two years before, he had never looked twice at another woman.

"Mr. Chipstead . . . I had to come!"

He noticed now that the girl was distraught. She was gripping the back of a chair with one hand, the other hanging limply by her side. She looked stricken.

Brooks had departed, closing the door behind him. They were alone.

"How jolly to see you again, Miss Courtenay!" He contrived to make his voice sound merely conventionally polite, and took her arm. She allowed him to guide her to one of the huge leather chairs flanking the wide hearth. She sank back into its comfortable depths with a sigh.

"Thank God you're here!" she said.

Chipstead was puzzled, acutely puzzled, but he did not risk asking her a direct question. Instead, he endeavoured to restore his visitor's

shattered nerves by talking about the commonplace.

“And quite thankful to be back, let me tell you. I have just had my first cup of English tea. Until you’ve been away from London for nine months you cannot possibly hope to realise what the first cup of tea tastes like when you return . . . Smoking?”

Something of the terror which had looked out from her eyes when she first entered the room had now gone. She had taken off her gloves, displaying perfect hands. She took a cigarette, leaned forward for it to be lit, and blew out a thin line of smoke.

“You don’t know how splendid it is to see you sitting there,” she said.

Chipstead acknowledged the tribute with a smile that just escaped being a grimace. Yet his commonsense told him there was not anything personal in the remark. The Chipstead Susan Courtenay was addressing was Sir Robert Heddingly’s friend, not the man who secretly loved her.

“You received the two wirelasses? . . . but of course you must have done. Thank you . . . I knew you would come.”

The words were spoken in little bursts. Suddenly she flung the cigarette away and shuddered. Her body shook as she leaned forward, her head between her hands.

Chipstead did not delay any longer in putting the question which he guessed to be crucial.

"Miss Courtenay," he asked, "where is Sir Robert Heddingly?"

Another shudder shook the girl's body.

"I don't know," she replied, lifting a tragic face; "he's disappeared!"

### CHAPTER III

### SUSAN'S STORY

CHIPSTEAD lit a cigarette himself.

"Disappeared?" he repeated.

Susan Courtenay interlocked her slim fingers.

"That is the only way in which I can describe it," she said. "I——"

Her companion silenced her by lifting a hand.

"Before you say anything more, let me offer you something—please, just a pick-me-up; you look tired."

She laughed nervously.

"I am. It has been rather a dreadful day, and to complete matters, I'm inclined to think I was followed when I came here. Could I have the teeniest drop of brandy? Do you mind?"

"Mind! My dear——" he remembered himself sufficiently to add, "young person!"

Then, thankful for the excuse, he rose and walked across the room.

"That ought to do you good."

She swallowed the spirit bravely, smiling as she handed back the glass.

"I can't hope to tell you how splendid I think you are. Without receiving any explanation, you throw up your Paris trip and come on here . . . it's quite wonderful!"

"Rubbish!" he replied. "I knew I must come when I received a message like that, signed 'Heddingly.' As for cancelling my visit to Paris, it was really the simplest thing; I just wirelessed to my London lawyer to go in my place. He's probably on his way by now."

She would not be shaken.

"I cannot possibly hope to thank you myself, but when father comes back . . ." She broke off, her whole body an entreaty; "you will bring him back to me, Mr. Chipstead?"

"Of course!" His tone was light; even if his thoughts were serious. The disappearance of a highly-placed Secret Service Chief was an important matter. And that remark about her being followed was disquieting. The reassuring smile remained on his face, however. "Now tell me just what has happened," he added.

Leaning forward in her seat, firelight shining upon her deep brown hair and lighting up the

almost miraculous beauty of her face, she made an unforgettable picture. Chipstead's heart drummed in his breast as he looked at her. One day some fellow, tremendously blessed by the gods, would snatch Susan Courtenay away from the world to inhabit with her a special kind of Paradise. And *he* would probably be asked to the wedding . . .

Her voice recalled him.

"For some weeks Father has not been well. Whether he felt ill or was merely worried I could not tell—you know how good he always is to me! When I tried to get his confidence, he always put me off. He had 'flu' rather badly early in September, and I put it down to that, hoping that he would recover.

"But, as time went on, he became worse, and one afternoon about a fortnight ago, I rang up Sir Arthur Holliday, the Wimpole street man, who had attended me once. Father professed to be annoyed, but when I told him how anxious I was, he allowed Sir Arthur to 'vet' him."

"What was the verdict?"

"Sir Arthur said that Father was so thoroughly run-down that he must have a complete rest. He looked very grave—usually he is such a merry little twinkling man—and added that he could not hold himself responsible if Father did not act on his advice."

"And did he?" Chipstead was unable to visualise Heddingly as a very tractable subject.

“After a long lecture from me, Father consented to go to Sir Arthur’s pet nerve-sanatorium in Bournemouth for a fortnight—no longer! He swore he would not know what to do with himself—but I packed and went down with him.”

The listener pushed a tilting log into position.

“Bournemouth, you say? Never been there.”

“You would love it—it’s quite the nicest place on the South Coast. A town that was cut out of a forest . . . it’s still full of pines. Oh, those gorgeous sandstone cliffs and red roofs of the houses . . . I loved them.” She stopped, biting her lower lip and looking like a defenceless child. “Until now,” she added in a whisper so full of fright that it shocked Chipstead to hear it.

“This is rather rotten for you—would you like to stop?” he asked.

The brown crisp curls waved fascinatingly as she shook her head.

“No—I must go on. You must hear everything for, you see, there isn’t a minute to be lost . . .” A sob escaped her, but she quickly rallied and continued her tale.

“I have told you I went down myself with Daddy. That was on Monday week—ten days ago. I wanted to stay in a hotel somewhere in the town, in order to be near him, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Said he wasn’t going to

be treated like a confounded invalid,—” Chipstead, listening, could in fancy hear Heddingly uttering the words—“and that if I wanted a change he would make it up to me by taking me to Cannes after Christmas. . . . So I left him in the nursing-home and came back to London the same evening. How I wish I had stayed . . . !”

Chipstead did not break in, and again she rallied.

“I wrote or 'phoned every day. He seemed to be going on splendidly. Sir Arthur Holliday went down the first week-end and came back quite buoyant. ‘Not a thing to worry about; he’s doing fine,’ were his actual words. Of course, I was delighted; the house seemed so empty . . . I was looking forward awfully to his return. Then——”

“Take your time.” Her companion’s voice was very gentle.

She looked at him gratefully.

“I 'phoned as usual yesterday morning. There was some delay after I got through. I heard what sounded like whisperings . . . Then the Medical Superintendent of the Home spoke. I could tell at once that he was frightfully worried. He said I wasn’t to be alarmed but he was experiencing a slight anxiety about Sir Robert. My first thought was that Daddy had become really ill—I mean that he had developed some disease—and the Superintendent’s subsequent conversation was



so guarded that I told him I was catching the first train down. When I arrived I learned the truth—that father had gone out for a walk early the previous afternoon and had not come back. Dr. Carthays, the superintendent, talked vaguely about loss of memory, but I didn't believe him—I *couldn't* believe him; I knew that something terrible had happened. That was why I went straight away and wirelessly you. I was distracted . . .”

“You did absolutely the right thing,” he assured her. “I should have felt hurt if you had not called on me.”

She faced him like a comrade.

“Knowing you were father's friend, I wanted you to be my friend too. But I put father's name on the message because I wanted to feel certain that you would come.”

He fought down the feeling which might have mastered him.

“I want you to believe that I would have come just the same, and just as quickly, if you had put your own name. And now,” with a change of tone, “let me ask you one or two questions.”

“Of course.”

Her face lost some of the distress which burdened it. She no longer felt alone—defenceless. Here was a man, strong, dependable and reliant—a man on whom she could rely and who would not let her down. She felt she would have liked him to hold her in

his arms for just a little while. She would have been soothed and comforted. But that was impossible. How could a man like Chipstead regard her except as a frightened, inclined-to-be-hysterical child? He was forty and she was twenty-two—there were whole worlds between them.

She became alert at the sound of his voice.

“Has anything been heard of Sir Robert since he left the nursing-home on Monday afternoon?”

“Nothing.”

“How many people know of his disappearance?”

“Very few. I had to tell father’s department, of course, but beyond Mr. McNalty and those he has taken into his confidence, there are only Sir Arthur Holliday, who is very unhappy about it, and the staff at the nursing-home. Dr. Carthays has given the other patients to understand that father merely returned home, cured. No one there except himself knew who father really was.”

Chipstead nodded.

“I don’t think you need be over-anxious. Going on what you have told me, I am very inclined to agree with the Medical Superintendent at the nursing-home. Sir Robert probably has been seriously overworking—he has done so all the time I have known him, so there is nothing unusual in that—and he has

had a minor nervous breakdown. Although I know very little about medical matters, it is quite feasible that Sir Robert's memory has temporarily given out. His department will be seeing that a most vigorous search is being made; we may hear any moment that he has been found." He was speaking like a prosy fool, he supposed, but he had to comfort the girl.

Susan Courtenay greeted his opinion by springing up.

"You do not really mean that," she cried, standing over him; "you are saying it merely to try to reassure me." And then, before he could make any comment, she continued, in a breathless tone: "I haven't told you about the telephone calls."

"What telephone calls?" Her look of intensity hurt him. "I say, I hate to see you distressed like this." He guided her gently back into the chair.

"They started about a fortnight ago," she said, after biting her lips again. "Oh, if I had only told father!"

"Why didn't you?" Evidently these unexplained telephone calls had a significance in this drama, and the speaker's tone was blunt without his being aware of it.

"He was too ill and worried. I guessed that a man in his position, doing his work, must have enemies, but——"

"I'm quite sure it doesn't matter," lied

Chipstead; "still, tell me. Perhaps I may be able to explain."

"They started, as I told you, about ten days ago. You know I act as a kind of secretary to father—at home, I mean?"

"He has often told me how much he relies on you."

"That is all nonsense, of course,"—but her face brightened at the praise. "Well, one of my duties is to answer the telephone. Father, as you probably know, positively hates the telephone—if he could do without it he wouldn't have the instrument in the house. He has told me so many times. And I dislike him using it too—after reading a book in which a man was killed by taking off the receiver."

Chipstead smiled.

"You mustn't take the modern sensational novelist too seriously; poor devil, he has always to be inventing fresh ideas for murders."

"Any way, after that," persisted Susan, "I really did not like father using the 'phone—call it absurd if you like, but there it was—and I always answered it myself when I was home."

"This first call came directly after father had left for his office. It was a man's voice, and after asking if I was Victoria 7777X, he said: 'How is Sir Robert this morning?' Naturally, enough, I imagined it was some friend of father's who had heard he wasn't very fit and had been kind enough to ring up."

“Quite,” agreed her listener, “what did you reply?”

“Why, unthinking, I said quite nicely that father was not too well—and then I asked the man’s name.”

“Did he give it?”

“Yes—in a way.”

Chipstead waited. He sensed that a revelation was coming.

“Repeat the man’s exact words if you can remember them,” he said, noting savagely that stark fear had returned to Susan Courtenay’s face.

She replied in little over a whisper.

“I heard the man laugh—it was a horrible laugh . . . it contained such a dreadful sneer—and then he said: ‘Tell him his old friend, The Disguiser, called him up.’ That was all; before I could say anything in reply, he had rung off.”

“Let me get you another spot of brandy.” Without waiting for her consent, Chipstead left his chair. He had to have time to school himself; the girl must not see his face. He had expected a revelation, but The Disguiser. . . .

He hurried back with the cordial.

“No, I won’t have any more, thank you, Mr. Chipstead.”

She waved the glass aside, and looked him straight in the eyes. “Have you ever heard of a criminal who calls himself ‘The Disguiser’?” she asked.

THE expected had come and he must meet it as best he could. It was certainly impossible to tell her the truth.

"I've heard there is such a person," he compromised.

"And did you know that he was an enemy of father?"

"To the best of my knowledge your father has never met him." This was true. Although during the war-years and afterwards, both Sir Robert and himself had had many desperate and thrilling brushes with the mystery-man who covered his identity by the apt title of "The Disguiser," neither had ever met this arch-enemy face to face—or if they had done so, it was whilst he was tricked out in one of his many effective disguises.

"But he must be an enemy . . . there was that dreadful sneer in his voice. It is he who has captured father!"

Chipstead put a hand on her shoulder.

"You mustn't worry," he said; "please leave things to me. Whatever can be done will be done. To-morrow I'll go down to the Sanatorium and take up the case from there. In the meantime," looking at the dark shadows beneath her eyes, "you must get some sleep. I will see you home."

In the hall of the house in Clarges-square, she placed a hand in his.

"If I only knew how to thank you, it . . . it would help." Her voice broke.

"I've done nothing yet," he replied.

His face was grave as he left the house. The Disguiser! That meant he was up against the most brilliant criminal force in Europe. The man had proved so uncannily efficient during the war that he had passed almost into a legend. He was said not to be a German, but he had worked on the enemy's side—and the real successes that had been chalked up against the Allies had mainly been scored by him. He had worked alone principally, and his few associates had proved astonishingly loyal. Which accounted for the fact that no definite or reliable knowledge of the real man had ever been obtained.

Unlike so many of the others, The Disguiser had not "closed down" with the war. Twice Chipstead had come across him in peace-time operations—in the affair of the murdered King's Messenger on the Channel-boat in 1920, and again in 1922 when the proposed new Japanese treaty was stolen from the study of the British Foreign Secretary—and in each instance the honours had gone to the enemy. After the latter episode a rumour had been circulated that the man known as The Disguiser had been killed in a brawl at a wine-shop in Taranto. The evidence had been so circumstantial that, with

a sigh of relief, the authorities had accepted the story as being true.

Heddingly, however, had been more sceptical. Because he had fought so many duels with this enemy, he found it impossible to credit that a man possessing the brilliant brain of The Disguiser could have met with so ignominious an end.

Bunny, back in his rooms by this time, recalled Sir Robert's actual words.

"It's too good to be true. Men like The Disguiser are not killed in low-down wine-shop brawls. This isn't the end by any means; you mark what I am saying."

But, as time went on, it certainly seemed as though the British Secret Service Chief was wrong. Nothing more was heard of The Disguiser. Life, although much safer, was considerably less interesting in consequence for certain of Sir Robert's agents, including Bunny Chipstead.

Bunny himself had always hoped that the report of The Disguiser's death had been false. It did not satisfy his sense of the fitness of things that the man should pass out in this way. Surely Fate should have decreed that the two of them must meet. As the years went by, however, and there came no sign that the story was inaccurate, he had the sportsman's regret that never again would he clash wits with this doughty foeman.

Even now there might be some mistake. It was possible that some infinitely lesser crafts-



man, some quite ordinary crook, had borrowed, in a fit of vainglory, the master's cognomen. There were many men who would risk a good deal to have the opportunity of killing Sir Robert Heddingly. Or again, it might be the work of a madman who, in his unbalanced state, conceived that he had taken on the identity of The Disguiser.

The door opened. Brooks appeared, his face a mask as usual.

"A person is requesting to see you, sir," he announced.

Chipstead awoke from his reverie.

"A person—what do you mean by 'a person,' Brooks?" The butler's archaic speech irritated when it did not amuse him.

"I should have said a man, sir."

"Did he give any name?"

The butler coughed.

"He refused to give me any name, sir. He said it was a personal matter—and of the highest importance." The speaker's manner denoted that he could not possibly agree with such proceedings, which had been unknown in the household of Lord Coxhaven.

Chipstead considered. There was a certain risk in seeing men who refused to give their names. But, on the other hand, this caller might have a very good reason for his secrecy.

"Show him in, Brooks."

"Yes, sir." The butler's attitude was still deprecating.

Bunny crossed to a bureau. From a drawer he took out a small revolver. This he slipped into his coat pocket.

The first impression the stranger gave was one of definite fear. The fellow was shaking.

"You are Chipstead—the man known as Bunny Chipstead?" he asked, and his teeth chattered as he said the words.

"I am Chipstead all right—come over by the fire." Bunny manoeuvred so that he stood between the visitor and the door. The man himself was a nondescript specimen, but his manner was interesting.

The caller rushed forward and seized Chipstead's arm.

"Don't lock that door—I may want to bolt that way. Or is there another way out of this room?" His manner was feverishly excited.

"There is no other way out—and you needn't be afraid. What you want is a drink." Bunny nodded across the room. "Help yourself."

Uttering a smothered ejaculation of relief, the man stepped across. With shaking fingers he poured himself out a stiff peg of brandy. He gulped it neat.

"Lock the door," he said. "I was told I could trust you—and I feel I can."

Without changing his position, Chipstead turned the key in the lock and put it into his pocket.

"Now please see if there's any one in the street below."

"Look yourself," replied Chipstead. He was not going to turn his back to this possible lunatic.

The man's manner as he gently pulled aside the curtains was still marked by fear. Either he was a consummate actor or he was really possessed by terror.

"There are a number of men walking up and down," he stated, turning back into the room; "it is difficult to say if any one is watching. But no doubt he sent some one."

"Who's 'he'?" asked Chipstead. "You'd better sit down, I think, and pull yourself together."

"Yes—yes."

The man appeared to make a great effort to calm his nerves.

"You think me a fool, I suppose?" he muttered, and then sank into a chair.

Chipstead remained standing.

"It is foolish to judge any one before listening to the reason," he replied; "in the first place, who is 'he'? I've asked you once."

The man shivered. He put his hand into a breast pocket and pulled out a packet.

"Look here," he said. "I've risked my life to bring that to you. I've crossed Europe with enemies dogging every foot of the way. No, don't look at it now; it will keep. Besides, it's all in cipher and code; it will have to be

worked out—and I haven't time now." He sprang up. "Give me proof that you're Chipstead," he cried, "or"—his fingers clutched the packet—"I swear I'll kill you!"

"Wait!" Chipstead reached out and rang the bell. "My servant will establish my identity," he explained.

The other muttered: "So much is at stake . . . I cannot take any chances."

The door opened.

"Brooks," said Chipstead, "will you please tell this gentleman my name."

"Your name, sir," replied the butler imperturbably, "is Mr. Buncombe Chipstead."

"Thank you, Brooks."

"Thank you, sir. Will there be anything further, sir?"

Chipstead turned to the visitor.

"Perhaps you would care to ask my butler some questions yourself."

The stranger waved his hand.

"No, thank you."

"You can go, Brooks."

"Thank you, sir."

"Satisfied?" enquired Chipstead.

The caller leaned forward.

"I dare say you think I am mad," he said, "but when you know all the facts you will understand. I'm sure now you're Chipstead; that is why I have every confidence in passing this over to you." The packet was placed on a small table.

Chipstead lit a cigarette with his left hand. The right he still kept in his pocket.

"All this is very interesting, but there are several questions——"

"Of course," came the sharp interruption, "you want to know who I am, what my name is, how I learned about you, why I was damned fool enough to trouble to bring that packet right across Europe with sudden death dogging me every inch of the way."

"Quite," confirmed Chipstead, raising his monocle, "but above all I am curious to know something about the man you have referred to as 'he'. There must be a very good reason why you should imagine 'he' has sent someone to shadow you here."

"There is—my God! there is." The man sprang up. His face was twitching.

"That packet," he said; "I want you to realise how important it is. Lock it away where no one can get at it. To-morrow, or some other time soon, we will go into it together—work out the cipher if we possibly can—and then try to get that devil by the heels."

"Why not now?" Chipstead kept his voice calm. Inwardly he was seething. He had come to a conclusion about his visitor by this time—and he thought it was a correct one. This man was not mad in the orthodox sense; his strange demeanour was caused by an overwhelming state of excitement. It was this which gave him such a crazed appearance.

“Because,” replied the visitor, who had crossed to the window again and was looking out upon the street, “I simply haven’t time. There is another man to meet, and,” with a weary gesture, “a thousand other things to see to. In twenty-four hours I may have the further information I require, and then our task will be so much the easier. Say,” he continued, giving Chipstead another surprise, for up to this time he had had no idea that the other was an American, “where can I see you at nine o’clock to-morrow night?”

His host scrutinised him intently.

“Damn you!” blazed the caller, “don’t hesitate! What are you afraid of? Haven’t I taken all the chances so far?”

“Yes,” was the admission, “but I want to know your name.”

“My name doesn’t matter. Nothing matters, except that you and I are the only living people who stand against—but,” with another glance through the window, “I must get off. There is somebody out there. Is there a back way?”

“Yes.” Chipstead was convinced by this time that he would not get anything further out of the man. “Where shall I see you to-morrow night?”

“It must be somewhere quiet—I’m getting afraid of men sidling up to me in the crowded streets. . . . Hyde Park: that’s where I’ll see you. There’s room to move there, and a fellow

can look after himself if anything looks like happening . . . You know Stanhope Gate? I'll be sitting on the first seat on the left as you enter the Park. Is that fixed? I'll tell you then all I know. Now show me that back way out. But before I go," he continued, with another of those sudden twists, "swear to me that you'll keep that packet safe."

"You needn't be afraid—no one shall get it," Chipstead said reassuringly. By now he had the most complete confidence in the man. Incredible as the other's story appeared on the surface, he was ready to believe it. Desperate men, fresh from a hand-to-hand encounter with Death, were apt to talk and behave like that.

When the man was safely away, he mixed himself a whisky and soda, lit another cigarette and picked up the packet. It proved to consist of a number of foreign sheets of note-paper held together by a brass fastener, and wrapped in an oilskin covering. The pages were covered with hieroglyphics and inscriptions which were meaningless. Realising that it would be impossible to attempt any deciphering without the key to the code, he placed the package in a wall-safe which had contained many other documents of value.

Usually on his first night in Town Chipstead went either to one of the night clubs—the Embassy was his favourite—or to a theatre.

The full flavour of the metropolis was to be had at both ; and, after a long absence, he liked to savour the peculiar fascination of London life.

But he did not even dress for dinner this evening. After the simple meal had been cleared away, he devoted himself to this new problem which was going to absorb him to the exclusion of everything else.

Three questions persisted. The first : How had Heddingly so entirely and completely disappeared ; the second : Was The Disguiser really alive ? and the third : Did the packet which the man had brought that night have any association with the crook ?

The morning of the day when he hoped to get enlightenment on these last two points broke clear and fine. After telephoning to Susan Courtenay, Chipstead taxied to Waterloo and caught the 8.3 train to Bournemouth. Chafing at the slowness—to travel just over 100 miles took the Southern Railway engine over three and a quarter hours—he eventually found himself at the beautifully-situated Connaught Lodge on the West Cliff. Even a hurried glance enabled him to appreciate the justice of Susan's eulogy the previous evening. To his right stretched the great bay which some compare to Naples. The morning sun shone on a fascinating combination of pine-tree studded bluff, sandstone cliffs, golden beach, and a sea surprisingly blue. He would



have lingered if only he could have spared the time.

Within Connaught Lodge he found real distress. Dr. Carthays, the medical superintendent, confessed to being almost beside himself with worry. "Not that it's any real fault of mine," he added. "Sir Robert was only allowed to do what every other convalescent is permitted to do—take a short walk in the afternoon sun along the West Cliff."

"No blame can rest on you, doctor," said Chipstead. "I wouldn't worry you now only I want to ask you one or two questions."

"I will do anything to help you, of course, Mr. Chipstead."

"Thank you. Now first of all, did any one call to see Sir Robert during the short time he was here?"

"No—no one."

"Did any one telephone?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Supposing any one besides Miss Courtenay had telephoned—would you have known about it?"

"Certainly. In a nerve-sanatorium such as this, the strictest watch is maintained so that nothing shall be allowed to upset the patients. All telephone calls, or messages of any sort, in fact, are communicated to me in case I may decide to withhold them from the particular patient."

“ Letters ? ”

“ Sir Robert’s letters were censored in London —by that I mean I was assured by Miss Courtenay that nothing at all worrying would be sent on. Usually such a patient is not allowed out alone, but Sir Robert seemed so well that day that I relaxed my usual custom.”

“ No one called whilst he was here ? ”

“ No one. The disappearance of Sir Robert is a complete mystery to me apart from my theory of sudden loss of memory.”

“ None of the staff know anything ? ”

“ I have questioned them all very minutely.”

There was nothing further to be gained, and, after shaking hands, Chipstead strode out to the West Cliff again. In the noon-day autumn sunshine the place looked an earthly Paradise. Yet it held a secret which he knew to be deadly, stealthy and sinister.

In one of the bends of the cliff he saw an artist busily engaged painting small sketches of the bay, whilst holding a conversation with an elderly man who appeared very interested in his work. As Chipstead passed, the latter stared at him rather hard.

Continuing his walk, Chipstead selected an isolated seat a couple of hundred yards further on and waited. The man who had been speaking to the artist followed and, after a glance round, sat down beside him.

“ Well, Matthews ? ” asked Chipstead.

The man threw away the match with which he had lit a cigarette.

"There's not the beginning of a clue," he said morosely; "the Chief might just as well have dropped over this cliff and been carried out to sea or have vanished into thin air. There's something very funny about this business."

"The medical man at the nursing-home talks about sudden loss of memory. By the way, have you checked up on him?"

"Of course. Carthays has a perfectly clean private and professional record."

"I shall be seeing McNalty when I get back to Town this afternoon," said Chipstead; "he will tell you how to carry on. I'm inclined to agree that this is a queer business. But we shall have to get to the roots of it."

"It doesn't seem to have any roots . . . Well," with a change of tone, as a man's figure showed round a bend, "I am pleased to have had this conversation with you, sir, and trust we may have the pleasure of meeting again one day."

"I hope so, too," was the polite reply.

In Bournemouth the sun had shone, but at Surbiton the train ran into a mist. This became thicker as Waterloo was approached, and by the time Chipstead stepped out on to the platform, a fog enveloped everything.

This was not so dense as to prevent him seeing Susan Courtenay.

"You should not have come out this weather," he remonstrated as they shook hands.

"I simply had to see you at the first opportunity," she told him; "did you—learn anything?"

He commenced to pilot her to a waiting taxi-cab.

"There was nothing to be gained at the nursing-home, but McNalty has one of his best men down there . . . one must have faith, you know." He would have told her about his strange visitor the night before but for the fear of raising false hopes.

"I have every faith." He felt the hand on his arm perceptibly tighten; "it's this waiting which is so terrible . . . the uncertainty . . ."

"I know," he replied, and realised how futile the words must sound.

"I thought you might come back by this train . . . you don't mind?"

"You honoured me," he said, and this time the reply did not seem futile.

A thick, dense pall hung over everything. The fog seeped through the tall railings of the Park as Chipstead walked down Park Lane. It made his nostrils tingle and threatened to choke his lungs. A perfect beast of a night. The burly figure of a policeman took on the

fantastic form of a grey wraith as he turned into the Park.

Before him stretched an impenetrable blackness. It was impossible to see more than a few inches ahead. Beyond that tiny radius all landmarks were obliterated. It was a phantasmagoric world in which he found himself.

Out of the stupefying greyness loomed a figure, emerging so quickly that the two collided.

"Sorry," muttered a voice. The next second the owner had vanished, swallowed up.

It might have been the man he had come to meet. He turned swiftly and went back. But the fog mocked him. There was no trace of any other human being, and he found himself moving round helplessly in a circle. Another step and he had gone headlong, his foot caught in a low iron railing.

Picking himself up, Chipstead cursed with the fluency which belongs only to men usually reticent of speech. He was crazy to be out at all on a night like this. That madman hadn't come, and if he had he wouldn't be able to find him. . . .

Then the thought of Susan Courtenay came as a sobering agent.

With infinite patience he traced his way back to Stanhope Gate. Having his bearings again, he started off fumblingly to the left.

The first seat on this side, the man had said.

A dozen steps brought him to something which showed a trifle darker than the rest of his surroundings. He bent forward, hand outstretched.

His fingers touched something soft—soft and cold. A man's face . . .

He drew back, attacked by an instinctive feeling of horror. Then, rallying himself, he pulled a box of matches from his pocket and struck a light.

The flare showed him a dreadful sight. A man was leaning back in one corner of the long seat. His features were twisted and contorted. From his chest protruded the handle of a dagger. It had been driven with such force that only the hilt showed.

So much Bunny was able to see when the match went out.

After a brief pause, which enabled him to get a grip on his nerves, he struck another. He had to make sure.

Yes, it was the man he had come to meet.

And he was dead.

THIS was a *dénouement* so unexpected that for some moments Chipstead was bewildered. But even in his confusion the sinister significance of the discovery leapt to his mind. The enemy had scored the first point in the duel. By some means, the mysterious "He" had learned that the nameless man had intended to expose him, perhaps in a vital fashion, and he had instantly ordered the other's destruction.

It was a *macabre* experience, looking down upon the distorted features of the man who, but for that recent visit to the St. James's Street flat, would probably still have been living. Framed in that thick grey fog, the face of the murdered victim took on an added ghastliness. Then the third match which he had lit flickered out and he might have been alone again in a sightless and unseeing world.

It was one of the queerest things he had ever known,

The card which Brooks had brought in bore the inscription :

*Mr. Robert J. Pearson,  
322a, Upper Thames Street,  
London, E.C.4.*

“Well?” Chipstead queried. He had spent a vain and unprofitable night—vain, because he had been unable to sleep, and unprofitable because the deeper he had pored over the entries on those sheets which the Unknown, now lying stiff and cold in the mortuary, had passed to him for safe keeping, the less he had been able to understand. Work in the Intelligence had given Chipstead more than a working knowledge of the average cipher system, but this code was beyond him. There seemed no clue to the key which would enable him to start unravelling the puzzle.

The majesty of Brooks' poise underwent a slight change.

“The gentleman was most insistent that he should see you, sir.”

Chipstead blew a cloud of smoke reflectively. There was the case of the other man who had been most insistent to see him—and that man was now dead—ruthlessly slain.

“Did Mr. Pearson say what his business was?” he asked.

“He stated that he wished to see you on a business matter of some importance, sir.”

Another few seconds of reflection and Chipstead gave his decision.

“Show him in, Brooks.” After all, why not? He would have a revolver concealed in the right-hand pocket of his coat, and it was unlikely that the caller, even if he did come from the Enemy Headquarters, would start



any nonsense. To kill a man late at night in a dense fog, in a lonely part of Hyde Park, was an entirely different proposition from murdering some one on his guard, in broad daylight, in his own flat.

"Mr. Pearson," announced Brooks.

Chipstead stood up to meet a heavily-built man who entered the room with a rapid and decisive stride. Mr. Robert J. Pearson looked fifty-five, and was immaculately turned out in the conventional attire of the London business man. He was so irreproachably clad that a shrewd observer, blessed or cursed with a cynical turn of mind, might have decided he was *too* well-dressed. Yet, superficially, there was nothing wrong : his dove-grey spats, fitting so neatly over patent-leather shoes, were quite in order ; his striped trousers could not have offended the most fastidious eye ; his dark-grey tie and the pearl which adorned it would probably have received a grudging nod of approval from that most severe of all sartorial authorities, the editor of the *Tailor & Cutter* ; in fact, in the time which Bunny Chipstead had at his disposal, he could find no flaw in the appearance of his visitor. Perhaps it was the man himself who was slightly wrong. But even here Mr. Robert J. Pearson passed a superficial examination. True, he was perspiring slightly, but then again it was a warm morning, and he was evidently in a hurry.

“Mr. Chipstead—Mr. Buncombe Chipstead?” he queried sharply.

“You have the advantage of me, Mr.—;” Bunny stopped to look at the name on the card he still held in his left hand; “I am afraid I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mr. Pearson, and I cannot conceive any reason why you should have called on me this morning. You told my servant that it was a matter of business, I understand? But please sit down—I haven’t been out, but it seems to be rather warm this morning.”

Mr. Pearson was evidently a man who wasted few words. He allowed his host’s meteorological remark to pass without comment, but accepted the invitation to seat himself.

“I have a somewhat strange story to tell you, Mr. Chipstead,” he remarked, rather breathlessly; “when you have heard it, no doubt you will consider your curiosity completely satisfied. At least, I hope so.”

“I hope so, too,” was the unexpected reply; “you mustn’t mind my asking you to be as brief as possible, Mr. Pearson—the morning, as I have previously remarked, seems pleasantly warm, and I have an appointment to play golf at Sunningdale.”

The caller curtly inclined his head.

“I will be as brief as possible,” he replied, “but as the matter is of great national as well as of commercial importance, I trust”—the note of sarcasm became rather more pronounced

—“that you will not consider even being late for a golfing appointment too much of a hardship.”

“You must leave that for me to decide, Mr. Pearson.” Chipstead was beginning to enjoy himself, for his respect for the caller had perceptibly increased.

Mr. Pearson started.

“I am the principal,” he said, “of a somewhat important firm of wholesale chemists. I tell you that because I wish you to devote all the attention possible upon my subsequent remarks.”

Chipstead nodded.

“I will promise that much, at least,” he said; “but I notice the name of your firm, Mr. Pearson, is not upon your card.”

“Quite so. That,” pointing to the card which was now lying upon the table between them, “is my private card. Here is the business card of my firm.” The speaker, having his pocket-book out by this time, passed across a larger piece of pasteboard.

Chipstead accepted it with a smile of acknowledgment. This interview was really becoming quite interesting.

“Messrs. Pearson, Son & Co., Ltd.,” he repeated, reading from the card; “no doubt you are a firm of considerable eminence, Mr. Pearson. The fact that I have never heard of you is, of course, immaterial. I am not, as you must be aware, a business man myself.”

The caller did not rise to the bait. Instead, he countered rather effectively.

"Until a few hours ago I was in complete ignorance of your existence, Mr. Chipstead. I know nothing about you now except that you appear," with a quick glance round, "to be a gentleman of taste and probably of considerable means. I trust that the latter circumstance will not prevent our doing business together."

"I am never averse to turning over a little money—if that is what you mean, Mr. Pearson."

"That is exactly what I *do* mean, Mr. Chipstead, and I am pleased to note that you are so clear-sighted. However, as you have already been at some pains to inform me your time is limited this morning—a handicap which I share equally with you—I will state my precise reason for calling upon a perfect stranger in this manner."

"Please," encouraged his host.

"You have in your possession, Mr. Chipstead," said the wholesale chemist of Upper Thames-street, "a certain package. I wish to convince you that that package, which was handed to you by a madman—" He broke off to put a blunt question. "Do you admit having received such a package, Mr. Chipstead?"

Certainly Mr. Robert J. Pearson had some sort of personality, Bunny decided. A new note had entered into his voice. He might have been a schoolmaster demanding of a

scholar the unequivocal reply to an awkward question.

But the scholar himself proved awkward, not to say difficult.

“ This is such an unusually interesting story, Mr. Pearson, that I hope you will not interrupt it by asking questions. Just one small enquiry myself: Are you by any chance addicted to the absorbing but pernicious habit of perusing sensational fiction ? ”

The caller frowned.

“ Your remark appears a ridiculous one, but I will answer it nevertheless by saying that I have no time for reading anything more than Dean Inge’s weekly articles in the *Evening Standard*, apart from the financial columns and the weekly *Chemical Record*. ”

“ My question, no doubt, was a frivolous one, but consider the elements you have introduced into your narrative so far—a madman, who has been murdered——”

The caller made a sharp interruption.

“ I said nothing about his being murdered ! ”

“ But surely, Mr. Pearson,” replied Chipstead, “ you must be aware that this person you have referred to as a madman was found dead on a seat in Hyde Park late last night with a knife buried in his heart ? ”

The visitor made a sign of impatience.

“ I know nothing about that,” he said ; “ and if the man about whom I have spoken is the same person as the unfortunate being discovered

murdered in the Park last night, then that fact is merely additional evidence of the serious nature of my call. Will you now please consent to hear me to the end without any further comment, Mr Chipstead?"

"Proceed, if you please."

"As I have already explained," continued the caller, "I am the principal of an important firm of wholesale chemists with offices and a warehouse in Upper Thames-street. Before the war we conducted an extensive business with Germany; since the beginning of 1920, that business connection has been very largely increased. The Germans, as you may be aware, are probably the cleverest and most resourceful chemists in the world—a fact which we as, I hope, enterprising business men, have never allowed ourselves to forget or to ignore.

"But now to the point: Six months ago or so we received a call from a man who refused his name and who otherwise preferred to conduct himself in a somewhat mysterious manner. For some time after being brought into my private office, he refused to state definitely what his purpose was. Instead, he kept demanding that not a word he spoke would ever be divulged to a living soul. The request was a peculiar one, to say the least, and at first I was inclined to refuse to have anything to do with the fellow. Eventually, and because the man's manner impressed me

in spite of my better judgment, as it were, I gave a sort of pledge. That would not satisfy my mystery-man, however; before he would speak a single word of any value, I had to take an oath on the Bible that everything he uttered I would hold sacred."

"And yet you come to me," put in Chipstead.

"The circumstances which I am about to relate are so extraordinary that I was forced to come to you; a little more patience, if you please, Mr. Chipstead."

"Very well," conceded Bunny, with an uneasy glance at the clock on the mantelpiece. He wondered if his apparent indifference deceived the other.

"I was saying," resumed the caller with a fresh sign of impatience, "that the man made me swear an oath on the Bible that everything he told me would be held inviolate, not only by myself but by every member of my firm. After I had taken the oath, he made me a remarkable proposition.

"He told me his name was Tompkins. He was an American who had lived a good many years in Germany. During the war he had been forced, he said, to carry on his work as a research chemist, and when he had protested on the grounds of his nationality, he had been treated so brutally that the memory would never leave him. He had been put in the same category as a prisoner of war, had been ill-fed, and his brains conscripted. He resented all

this fiercely. It was because of such treatment that he decided to be revenged. The day he called on me saw the opportunity for which he had worked for years ripe for fulfilment. Are you interested?" the narrator broke off to enquire.

"Intensely."

It was a truthful declaration. Robert J. Pearson was a skilful tale-pitcher; the story he was telling now had many pleasing qualities, even if Chipstead found the man himself far more interesting than his narrative.

"I am glad," was the retort. Mr. Pearson may have been glad, but the glance which the speaker gave his host from beneath lowered lids did not lend the impression of overwhelming pleasure. There was a sharper edge to his voice as he continued:

"Briefly, what the man Tompkins proposed," he went on to explain, "was that he should sell to me the chemical formulae of certain highly valuable new manufacturing processes, amongst them that of pyramidon (a substitute for aspirin). As the methods of making these drugs were absolutely unknown to us at the time, you will readily see the potential value of Tompkins' information."

"Quite so," was the comment. Mr. Robert J. Pearson was assuming an added interest every minute. It was an ingenious tale he had, but the unfortunate fact was that it did not fit in with such few facts as were already in his



hearer's possession. The words which the dead man had used two nights before in this same room echoed through Chipstead's brain: "I've risked my life to bring that to you. I've crossed Europe with enemies dogging every foot of the way." Of course, if the man was really unbalanced, these words of drama could be accounted for, but . . .

Mr. Pearson was at his story again.

"You will perhaps wonder why Tompkins, after receiving such ill-treatment from the Germans, should have continued to stay in the country. He explained that by saying he was actuated, indeed obsessed by the desire to be revenged. He was, it seemed, a particularly brilliant research worker, and once the Armistice was signed, the Germans did everything they possibly could to try to induce him to forget his unfortunate experiences. That famous organisation, the Brandt Dye Corporation, with factories at Höchst-on-Main, offered him liberal terms to remain in their employ—and for the reason which he explained to me, he stayed on."

"The Armistice was signed ten years ago," put in Chipstead.

"I know," agreed Pearson very cordially; "but Tompkins was a single man, he had no home-ties, and the ruling passion of his life had become this desire to be revenged. Anyhow, he remained with the Brandt Dye Corporation, and by degrees learned their commercial

secrets. It was these secrets which he offered to me——”

“ At a price ? ”

“ Certainly. From the point of view of my firm, I had to regard the matter purely as a business proposition. Tompkins’ private affairs were nothing to do with it. The only thing that concerned me was buying first on behalf of my firm and secondly on behalf of the Government—for the recipes the man offered were for other products besides drugs—extremely valuable formulae.”

“ Which Tompkins had stolen.”

The caller snapped his fingers impatiently.

“ We are not going to have any foolish arguments about ethics, I hope, Mr. Chipstead ? As you have stated yourself, you are not a business man. If you were, you would know that the first axiom of a commercial house is to buy valuable information at the lowest price possible. The price the man Tompkins asked was £50,000—and I paid it.”

“ After making sure that his goods were up to sample, of course ? But even so, for such a keen business man, you appeared to be rather an optimist, Mr. Pearson.”

The other frowned portentously.

“ This is where I ask for your further attention, Mr. Chipstead. On behalf of my firm, I committed a serious blunder. I confess that much very frankly. Convinced from experiments which Tompkins made in our laboratory

that he was not only an exceptionally gifted chemist, but that his information was all that he said it was, I gave him the cheque on condition that he handed over his book of recipes or formulae that same day. Unfortunately, that very night he must have lost his reason—he was in a very excitable condition at our interview. It is only a conjecture, but I should imagine that the form his madness took was to believe that he was surrounded by enemies and that his life was in actual peril. That, no doubt, was the reason why he called on you and handed you the package which I have explained belongs by right of payment to my firm.”

Bunny stared through his monocle.

“Do you mind explaining exactly what you mean by that last statement?” he replied.

The wholesale chemist of Upper Thames-street leaned forward in his chair.

“I will be frank with you, Mr. Chipstead.”

“It would, perhaps, be as well,” supplemented his host.

After a slight pause, Mr. Pearson made the required explanation.

“I made one mistake, as I have said, but I endeavoured to rectify it directly afterwards. Having paid this man Tompkins the large sum of £50,000, I wished to be sure, and so I had him watched. That is why I know he called on you at this flat some hours after he had my cheque in his pocket.”

“As a business man, you did not think, I take it, of ringing-up your bank and having the cheque held up?”

“I did not do any such fool’s trick,” snapped the other, anger now showing plainly in his face. “If you were in business, you would realise the crass stupidity of such a proceeding. With a sensitive, overwrought man like Tompkins to deal with, I should have been cutting my own throat. Why, the first thing he would have done upon finding my cheque not met at the bank would have been to break off all negotiations and take the formulae elsewhere. That would have meant my losing the chance of making a fortune—I will be frank and say a huge fortune.”

“And the nation would have suffered also—do not forget the nation, Mr. Pearson.”

For a moment it seemed likely that the wholesale chemist would have liked to use one of his more deadly poisons upon the person of the commentator.

“You are jesting with me, Mr. Chipstead.”

Bunny rose. Upon his lips was a half-smile, but there was an edge to his voice.

“Now please pay attention to me, Mr. Pearson—if that is your right name.”

“Naturally it is my right name,” came the angry interjection; “is it your intention to insult me?”

“My sole intention,” returned Chipstead politely, “is to save such a busy business man

as yourself from wasting any further time. Briefly, your call has been wasted. You have told me a story which, although interesting, would scarcely have deceived a child. . . .”

This time the interjection was exceedingly angry.

“You have in your possession property which belongs to me. I demand that you shall give it up. If you persist in refusing, I shall have no alternative but to go to the police. And let me tell you also, sir, that I have influential friends; for instance, the President of the Board of Trade, Sir Walter Treherne, is a connection of mine by marriage—and—” Mr. Pearson broke off to watch Chipstead walk across the room to press the bell.

“You refuse to listen to me!” he shouted.

Chipstead waved a hand.

“You accuse me now of being impatient. That’s rather ungrateful, surely. I’ve been priding myself on having been quite a good listener. Oh, Brooks,” as the servant answered the summons, “show Mr. Pearson out and fetch my golf clubs, please. Good morning, Mr. Pearson, and thank you for calling.”

“You damned scoundrel!”

Chipstead looked across at the astounded butler.

“Brooks, the gentleman is spluttering—a sure sign that he requires fresh air.” To the splutterer: “I have already said ‘good morning’.” He turned away.

The man gone, Bunny did some reflecting. What had been the object in staging this elaborate pretence? And for whom was this person Pearson working—for himself or for some one else?

He walked across the room, and looked through the bulky telephone directory. There was a firm called Pearson, Son & Co. Ltd., with offices in Upper Thames-street. Curious. Taking off the receiver, he asked for the number.

“I wish to speak,” he said, when connection had been established, “to Mr. Pearson, the head of the firm.”

The reply came immediately.

“Mr. Pearson is away in America, sir. Perhaps you would care to talk to his secretary if the matter is important.”

“Thank you,” answered Chipstead, “I will communicate with Mr. Pearson when he returns from the States. Can you tell me when you expect him back?”

“He is due to sail on Saturday on the Berengaria, sir.”

“Thank you once again.” Bunny rang off.

So the call that morning had been a bluff, as he had supposed. The caller was an impostor. But why the masquerade?

The question was quickly answered. It meant that the enemy were aware of the identity of the man to whom the package had been passed. But this being so, he could

scarcely believe that they had such a poor opinion of his mentality as to imagine that he would be taken in with such a tale as the envoy had brought.

No, the only possible conclusion was that they must have known from the beginning that he would not swallow such a story. The obvious flaws were not filled in on account of this. His natural suspicions had been deliberately played upon. Why? Obviously because there was some deeper move behind this preliminary skirmishing.

Then the telephone rang and the sound of Susan Courtenay's voice drove everything else temporarily from his mind.

#### CHAPTER VI AN INTERVIEW AT SCOTLAND YARD

**H**ER voice, wrought as it was with anxiety, thrilled him.

"Good morning, Mr. Chipstead—is there any news?"

"I am afraid there is nothing of importance. And do you mind me saying that this isn't the sort of morning to do any worrying? Let me take you for a run in my car if you can spare the time."

Some of the suppressed entreaty in his voice must have reached her.

“ Into the country ? ”

“ Into the country, certainly ; there are mornings when the country seems necessary to one’s peace of mind. Where and when shall I pick you up ? ”

“ I can be ready in half-an-hour if that will suit.”

“ Admirably ! ” Chipstead’s voice matched her own, into which a little excitement had crept.

In twenty-seven and a half minutes the long, lean Hispano tooled down the street and stopped outside the house every detail of which was familiar to the driver. How many pleasant hours he had spent inside those hospitable walls. . . . It was difficult to imagine that tragedy now overhung its accustomed friendliness. Bunny frowned : if Bob Heddingly were dead, he would ransack the world until he had killed with his own hands the murderer.

The door opened, and Susan Courtenay stood framed in the morning sunlight. She made a fascinating picture in her simple frock, a big fur coat over her arm.

“ You *are* early ! ” she exclaimed with a touch of her old animation.

“ One of my few virtues is endeavouring to be on time,” he said, helping her into the seat beside him.



She turned impulsively.

“Forgive me worrying you, Mr. Chipstead, but—but nothing has happened since I rang you up, I suppose?”

“Nothing. But I want you to relax to-day and so I am going to be presumptuous enough to offer you some advice. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. You have been so kind that——”

He put up his left hand.

“Please! In the meantime, because I want you to enjoy the next few hours, will you try to forget what has happened? News of Sir Robert is bound to crop up very soon, I am sure.” He compromised with his conscience by the assurance that it was far better for her to remain in ignorance of the recent startling developments. It was now abundantly clear that Heddingly was in the power of The Disguiser, but he could not possibly tell her so. Sooner or later, the enemy was sure to show his hand in a still more definite form, and when he did, he would take action himself. In the meantime, the girl must be shielded from dangerous knowledge.

Susan touched his arm.

“I have worried so much that I feel I cannot think any more; my brain seems dead. I promise to try to put the horror out of my mind—at least for to-day.”

Turning, his eyes caught hers. She was looking at him with the unfaltering faith of a

trusting child. He vowed again to try to be worthy of his charge.

The powerful roadster zoomed through the heavy traffic of the Finchley-road, gathering speed after passing Golder's Green, and sang its way out into the Great North Road.

"Don't tell me where we are going—I leave everything to you," said Susan, snug in her furs. She patted the rug about her knees, whilst a slight flush gave an added charm to her cheeks.

"I promise not to say a word," replied Chipstead. Although he knew his secret quest to be unattainable, the years slipped away from him; he might have been a boy. The sun shone, the powerful car had become a fairy-chariot, the girl to whose service he had pledged himself was by his side. Ahead lay difficulties, danger—but for the moment, he was well content.

They lunched at a sixteenth-century inn, one of the few remaining hostelries in England which can still be depended upon for good food and adequate service. In that panelled, oak-raftered coffee-room where, in bygone days, coaching parties had dined and supped, it was pleasant to linger. Through the latticed windows the autumn sun shone, lighting up the beauty of Susan Courtenay so that she seemed to her companion to be a piece of beautiful porcelain, too fragile to touch.

"How lovely this is!"

She had finished the one cigarette she allowed herself, and was reclining in the high-backed chair near the window in a position of utter relaxation.

"Sometimes I wish father—" she stopped to look at Chipstead. "No, I promise not to be foolish," she went on; "I was merely going to say that sometimes I have wished that father would give up his work and take me into the country to live. Everything is so peaceful—so clean, so unspoilt."

Bunny, pulling at his cigar, nodded. The girl's words had brought a vision to him—a vision which he knew could prove only to be a mirage, but for a moment he dwelt upon it, nevertheless.

He recalled a villa he had once seen at Cagnes, mid-way between Cannes and Nice on the French Riviera. It had orange-washed walls, and blue shutters. It was built upon sheer rock, and from the verandah on the first floor one could see for miles along the Côte d'Azur. Straight in front was the unbelievable blue of the Mediterranean; behind stretched the majestic Maritime Alps, comprising some of the most magnificent mountain scenery in the whole of Europe. Further behind again, between the rich plains of the Saône and Rhône and the fertile green farms of Switzerland, was the Jura country—a region as yet practically unknown to the English tourist and pleasure-seeker. A secret region of delight, this, in which Nature

had been profusely prodigal—a land in which cascades sparkled amidst the dense foliage of noble forests, and where one could see the overhanging trees mirrored in emerald lakes. Here it was possible to wander for days without meeting a soul except a brother fisherman, eager for the matchless trout which abound in the miraculously clear, slowly-flowing rivers. Bunny had once passed through this entrancing country, and he had often hungered for further exploration. But he had never found time.

Now . . . with this girl by his side. . . .

“Have you ever been to the French Riviera?” he asked, afraid that his long spell of silence might be misunderstood.

“No—father promised to take me next winter.”

“He will still take you.”

Bunny lapsed into his musing again. There was only one land fair and gracious enough for this girl to live in, and that was France. For her eyes matched the sapphire blue of the most romantic sea in the world; she was made for sunshine and laughter—and where else can Provence be surpassed or even equalled in these respects? There was a golf course standing a few hundred yards away from that villa at Cagnes. They would play together. In the afternoons the car could carry them away on any one of a hundred delightful expeditions. At night they could dine simply by themselves, or he would

take her to outshine any of the world's reigning beauties in Les Ambassadeurs at Cannes or Ciro's at Monte Carlo. Only occasionally, for mostly he would want her all to himself. . . .

"How very thoughtful!"

There was a gentle raillery in her voice, and he pulled himself together with a start. Dreaming fool. . . . Nothing of this could ever possibly happen, of course.

"I was thinking of the pleasure you will get out of your first visit to the South of France," he replied. "It is a land of happiness and laughter. Many hard things have been said about the French, but I have always found them delightful. In Provence every one unites in being kindness itself—the servants in the hotels, the shopkeepers, the natives. It is only the visitors one gets to dislike—the English, because so many of them are snobs, selfish and rude even to each other—I could write an article about the behaviour of the English visitors staying in Riviera hotels—and the Americans, because by their ruthless determination to pay extravagant prices for everything, they tend to over-commercialise the soul of the native."

"That is rather cruel criticism, surely?"

"Not at all. When you go to the Côte d'Azur yourself, you will see the truth of what I have been saying. I am half English and half American so I can scarcely be accused of prejudice. America and England are both great

nations, but some of their representatives are scarcely seen at their best when travelling in France. And the supposed educated classes are often the worst : when I was in the Riviera last I watched an English clergyman and his wife give a surprising exhibition of bad temper because they did not like the position of their table in the dining-room."

" I must be careful."

" You—!" He dared not say any more. Her beauty caught his throat so that he could scarcely breathe. The classic purity of her small face, her eyes that were like stars peeping from a Riviera night-sky, the softness of her lips, the delicate curves of her young, wondrous body—how could he have continued without making a fool of himself!

Suddenly, like the trumpet of Doom itself, there came a tumult of sudden thunder. It filled the room with crashing sound. From what had been a clear sky, lightning flashed. The beat of heavy rain fell upon their ears. The spell was broken.

If Chipstead had been a superstitious man, he would have construed this change of the elements into a sign—a warning, carrying a two-fold message: first, that happiness with Susan Courtenay was not for him, and secondly that it was disastrous to idle when real work was waiting to be done. The powers that arranged the destinies of mankind were flying their signals and he could not ignore them.

“ It’s raining ! ”

The commonplace words were invested by the girl with something almost approaching tragedy. To her, too, a vision, sad and perhaps desolating, had apparently been vouchsafed.

Hating the world, Chipstead paid his reckoning, and led the way to the car.

The sense of depression had not lifted by the time he reached his rooms in St. James’s-street. If he had not been in his usual perfect health, he would have attributed this feeling of vague uneasiness to want of exercise ; but he knew the *malaise* to be of the spirit instead of the body. He had a foreboding which could not be shaken off—something was due to happen. The air seemed full of portents. On other occasions in his life he had been forced to listen to these invisible voices—but then he had saved himself from brooding by taking action. Now he was powerless ; until the enemy moved, he could make no counter-step.

Mixing himself a whisky-and-soda, he reviewed the events in proper sequence. For some purpose as yet unknown, The Disguiser had schemed to obtain possession of the body of the man he had reason to hate and fear. Certainly it was Sir Robert Heddingly who in the past had thwarted more of his schemes and intrigues than any other Secret Service Chief.

This initial planning had been successful ;

that important fact had to be faced. He had endeavoured to calm Susan's fears by saying the obvious thing, but, with every available man in his department working on the case, it was inconceivable that Heddingly, supposing he had gone wandering off a victim to amnesia, should not have been found by this time.

What was The Disguiser's purpose? It might be murder; but he did not give this any great attention. Any crook could commit murder—the easiest possible crime—and the man he was up against had proved himself on innumerable occasions in the past to be a master of finesse. He felt sure the other's artistic mind would revolt at anything so commonplace, even though he knew Heddingly to be at once a dangerous and determined foe.

No, he was convinced that Heddingly was still alive. But, his being alive was perhaps in some respects a worse circumstance than his actual death. Somewhere Bob was being held, a victim, a hostage—perhaps a pawn to be used by The Disguiser in a fresh scheme.

It was to be a big *coup*—already one man had lost his life whilst endeavouring to take a part in this hazardous game. And who was that mysterious individual around whose dead body the whole perplexing chain of events revolved? His face had been totally unfamiliar, but he had worked in the underworld of European capitals either as a criminal or as a secret



agent—so much was certain. And that he was feared, either as a traitor or as a spy, was proved by his being mercilessly killed.

Bunny's hand tightened round the stem of his glass. The odds were about even; if The Disguiser had Heddingly, he had the package which, when deciphered, might be the means of blasting the schemes of The Disguiser, that skilled dispenser of sudden death, sky-high. So far the figures and hieroglyphics in the book had appeared completely without meaning, but, nevertheless, they must have the highest significance. Some more concentrated swotting, and they would be bound to yield something.

Outside in the hall the telephone gently shrilled and Brooks appeared.

"Scotland-yard wishes to speak to you, sir," he announced. On the butler's round, immobile face was reflected an expression of pain. It said plainly enough: 'I am not used to such goings on; unless conditions here alter I shall really have to consider giving in my notice.'

His master sprang up and brushed past him. Anything which promised action was welcome.

"Is that Mr. Chipstead speaking?" enquired a cold, hard voice.

"Yes—Chipstead this end," replied Bunny. He had every respect for Scotland-yard—in their particular sphere—but he had no direct association with Police Headquarters; he had

never co-operated with them, and had never asked for their help. That was not the way he worked for the British Secret Service.

He was anxious now to know what the Yard wished to speak to him about, and he listened attentively to the words which came over the wire.

“The Deputy Commissioner speaking. I wish you could make it convenient to come down to see me.”

“Before dinner?” The time was ten minutes to seven.

“At once if you will be so good.” There was little cordiality in the invitation.

“Very well; expect me in ten minutes.” Chipstead’s smile was rather grim as he replaced the receiver.

There was a minute to spare as the constable, who acted as his guide, knocked on the door of a room, the windows of which looked out upon the busy activity of the Embankment. A man of late middle-age, carrying the unmistakable imprint of an Army officer, rose from a swivel-chair and regarded the visitor keenly before formally holding out a hand.

“Sit down, Mr. Chipstead,” started the Deputy Commissioner; “I am sorry to have kept you from your dinner, but there is a vastly more important matter to be discussed.”

Chipstead looked across and smiled.

“Is there any subject which requires more

serious discussion than one's dinner?" he asked blandly.

The frown on Sir Reginald Barclay's face deepened.

"You will oblige me by not being frivolous. From what I have heard, you are a man who upon occasion can be relied upon."

"Very occasionally." Chipstead clipped the words. This inquisitor was a capable person at his job, but he possessed in very marked degree that particular type of brusque and self-centred official mind which all his life he had found particularly irritating. And the other's method of approach was the reverse of ingratiating. It seemed almost as though Barclay wished to pick a quarrel with him.

"Please pay attention to what I am about to say," came the rebuke; "a man was found murdered in Hyde Park last night, and I understand you know something about him."

"I?"

"You! Please answer me without any trimmings; did you know anything about the man?"

Chipstead was irritatingly slow in replying. He pulled out his case and lit a cigarette. It was not until he had taken three puffs that he spoke.

"Before I can answer that, I must know what is in your mind. Do you, for instance, suggest that I had anything to do with this man's death?"

“Certainly not. But a serious crime has been committed and I have to investigate it. An inquest will be held, and it may be necessary for you to attend as a witness.”

This time the answer was very definite.

“I shall certainly not do that.”

The Deputy Commissioner drew his chair nearer to the speaker.

“You realise, I suppose, the serious nature of that statement?”

“Perfectly.”

“Very well. Then I have no need to give you any further warning. May I ask why you have decided to adopt this attitude?”

“Because if I went into the witness-box, some blundering fool might ask certain questions to which I should be compelled to give false replies. Besides, I do not intend to waste time which is likely to prove very valuable in attending this enquiry.”

“Then you admit you have certain information about this man who has been murdered?”

“The information I have, which is very scanty indeed, concerns that department of the British Secret Service with which I have the honour of being associated. At the moment I regret that I cannot amplify that statement.”

Sir Reginald Barclay became instantly very angry.

“I will see Sir Robert Heddingly about this,” he declared.

The reply was satisfactory to Chipstead. It showed that so far the disappearance of his old friend and chief had been kept a close secret. Only Heddingly's own Department knew the truth. In keeping the news strictly to themselves, the men had lived up to the best traditions of the Service. Whilst entertaining a very lively regard for Scotland-yard, this was a personal matter and they had decided to keep it so. Their own good name was concerned; the Head of their Department had vanished and it was up to them to find him—unaided. To call in the help of the police would be an intolerable confession of weakness.

"I understand Sir Robert is indisposed and away from his office. But, of course, if you care to take the matter to the Secretary of State, you are at liberty to do so."

The assurance, approaching indifference, which the speaker used, caused the Deputy Commissioner to gnaw at his neat, grey moustache.

"You are taking a very high hand, sir!" he exploded.

"Not at all; I am merely trying to point out that, for reasons which you should be the first to appreciate, I am unable to state what little I know concerning this man who you say was found murdered in Hyde Park."

"You admit that the man called on you the day before his death?"

"After what I have told you, Sir Reginald,

I do not intend to admit anything. So far as I know, the man was not a criminal."

Bunny rose. He delivered a parting shot.

"If a man who calls himself Pearson and who professes to be a wholesale chemist of Upper Thames-street should call here preferring any charge against me, will you inform him he is an impostor?"

"You seem very fond of mysteries," commented the Deputy Commissioner, in an acid tone; "what charge is this man Pearson likely to prefer against you?"

"There again I must be mysterious," replied Chipstead, and bowed himself out of the room.

Once away from Scotland-yard, he considered the position. He had made an enemy that evening—at least, if Sir Reginald Barclay did not prove an active enemy, it was certain he bore no goodwill to him. This situation was in a measure ironic, for it was directly due to him that Barclay owed his important position. After a sensation which reverberated round the world, he had been the means of deposing Sir Reginald's predecessor and having him safely installed in an institution for the criminally insane.\*

Chipstead knew that Scotland-yard had never

\* *In the Dark.*

really forgiven him over this matter. A crook who had paralysed the official life of the nation by his daring *coups* had been discovered to be no less a person than the very head of the Criminal Investigation Department himself! And the revelation had been disclosed by a man working for another Service.

In what lay ahead, Bunny realised that he would be in every sense of the term a lone hand.

But he preferred to work in that way; he was used to it.

## CHAPTER VII THE VOICE BEHIND THE MASK

SIR ROBERT HEDDINGLY was so weak that he resolved to reserve what little strength remained to him. He suspected he had either been drugged or kept without food—perhaps both.

The extraordinarily attired man standing over him continued his talk.

“It affords you considerable satisfaction, I have no doubt, Sir Robert, to meet me at last,” said the mocking voice. “How many times during the war years, and afterwards, you must have prayed for such a privilege, I can only

conjecture. Now you have the honour—make what use you can of it.” The final words were accompanied by a laugh that sounded quietly menacing.

The British Secret Service Chief endeavoured to raise himself in the bed that was his prison. But his strength had vanished: he was as helpless as an invalid.

Yet he concentrated all his mental force so that he might memorise every detail about this enemy. Even in this he had practically no satisfaction: the man who had taunted him wore a long voluminous cloak reaching to the knees, which effectively hid his body. It was impossible to tell whether he was slim or stout or whether he possessed an average figure. As for the face, this was completely hidden by a black silk mask which covered all the features. Even the shape of the wearer’s mouth remained a mystery.

“You had imagined, no doubt, that I was dead,” continued the voice behind the mask: “rejoice, then, my dear Sir Robert, that the rumour was grossly exaggerated. It is true that for a few years I was content to idle, spending the considerable fortune which the success of certain schemes had brought to me; but the active mind chafes at inactivity and so I have returned to attempt yet one more little *coup*. It was necessary for my preliminary plans that you should become my guest. Naturally a merciful man, I disregarded the



suggestion that you should be killed—you cannot imagine how my sensitive nature revolted at the crude barbarity of such an idea!—and so, as long as you behave yourself, no great harm is likely to come to you.”

The prisoner gave no sign that he had heard a word.

“You are silent, my dear Sir Robert. In spite of your recent—shall I call it indisposition?—one would have imagined that you would have shown more interest. However, since I am determined to play fair with you, I will let you a little into my confidence. You will stay here until the little *coup* to which I have already referred is completed. I have no doubt of its ultimate success because, as you have every reason to know, empty boasting is not one of my many sins. When everything is satisfactorily concluded, you will possibly be allowed to return to your normal life. Your adopted daughter will no doubt be pleased to welcome you home——”

The restraint which Heddingly had placed upon his endurance snapped.

“You swine!” he cried.

The voluminous cloak quivered as though the man inside it had drawn himself more erect.

“I am not an Englishman, but my knowledge of your difficult language is fairly comprehensive. I gather that the term you have just used concerning me is opprobrious.

I have already made the statement that I am a merciful man, but I would warn you, nevertheless, not to try my patience."

In spite of his resolution, in spite even of his flaming rage, which had threatened a minute before to drive him insane, Heddingly felt himself shivering. Although this was the first time to his knowledge that he had ever seen or spoken to this man, he knew him to be the arch-criminal who hid his identity under the appellation of The Disguiser. He knew him to be an evil genius, ruthless, completely fearless, a man who could kill whilst humming a snatch of a song—a man, moreover, who always lived up to his word. He had crossed the trail of many desperate criminals during the years he had been engaged in the Secret Service operations of his country, but The Disguiser stood alone. The man was nothing short of a Napoleon—his boldness of conception was staggering and the methods he used in securing success flawless and magnificent. They had fought many duels, but the principal honours had gone to The Disguiser.

It was into the hands of this man he had fallen.

"And now I will leave you so that you may enjoy your lunch. Being still an invalid, the food must necessarily be light, but later, when you have recovered your strength, an improvement may be made in that direction."

With his voluminous cloak flapping about him, the speaker left the room.

Sir Robert groaned as he lay back upon the pillows. It was an absurd, an intolerable position—and yet he was completely helpless. He was as much at the mercy of the man who had taunted him with such searching maliciousness as if he had been bound hand and foot with ropes. But The Disguiser was not the ordinary kind of thug ; he preferred subtlety to crudeness. Instead of beating his victim into unconsciousness he robbed him of his strength by other but equally effective means.

If the man had not hinted at his identity, he would have scoffed, in spite of his condition, at the melodramatic trappings of his captor. But those words meant all the difference ; they represented a significance which could not be ignored. The probability was that the cloak and mask were merely necessary precautions so that no clue to the real man should be disclosed ; it might be that even those who worked with him were never allowed to form a definite idea of his figure or face.

What was this *coup* which The Disguiser had prophesied with such assurance would be accomplished ? Something audacious, calling for resource, ingenuity and skill without a doubt, something for the success of which it was necessary that he—and here Heddingly felt a wave of dismay flood through him—should be held a prisoner away from his office.

It was a sickening thought. The very machinations which he was entrusted by the nation to thwart would be accomplished with his unconscious help—that was really the situation.

He was to be used as a pawn—and perhaps Susan, too! The latter reflection robbed him temporarily of what courage he had left. Susan! He could picture the child's agonised worry; in her anxiety to help him she would be an easy prey to any snare which this master-enemy might lay for her. The very care with which he had shielded her from all knowledge of the underworld that had been his workshop for so many years now recoiled on him; he dared not think about it.

In his agony, Heddingly had a sudden hope. Bunny Chipstead was due back from America very soon, and when he heard the story from Susan—as he would be bound to hear it if Susan was still free to speak—he would move Heaven and earth to try to solve the mystery. He would have the help of the entire Department, too, although, knowing Chipstead as he did, he guessed his old friend would play, as usual, a lone hand. The police he could discount; nothing would be said to the police; this was a personal matter and would be kept so.

Bunny. It was the one chance. But then came a second fear: The Disguiser, with his acute brain, would reason along exactly the

same lines as himself. Although he had gained the first important trick, he would make due and proper preparation for accidents. He would be bound to know that the one person to be feared was the man who had worked so long with his prisoner as chief lieutenant. Not suspecting anything, Bunny might be led into a trap. Heddingly groaned.

He was still very hazy about the way he himself had been snared. It was quite true that the attack of 'flu had left him feeling devilishly weak, nervy and altogether out of sorts, but, once he had allowed himself to be taken to the Bournemouth nursing-home, his recovery had been rapid. He had picked up wonderfully.

Every detail of that last afternoon was perfectly clear—up to a point. He recalled walking round the Overcliff Drive after leaving the nursing-home on the West Cliff, and, the sea looking so inviting in the late autumn sunshine, going down the steps leading to the shore at Durley Chine. There had been a few deck-chairs left by the attendants on the almost deserted sands, and, with a sigh of gratitude at promised rest, for he had walked further than he had intended, he had sunk into one.

It really had been a most pleasant spot. He was so delighted with it that he determined to stay sufficiently long to smoke just two cigarettes.

He had pulled his case out—he remembered

the fact distinctly—and lit a cigarette, taking a long, deliberate puff, for it had been the first of the day. That Medical Superintendent chap—what was his name? Carthays?—had been rather a crank about tobacco, and had talked a lot of hokum about cutting out smoking altogether—what rot, especially to a man who had been in the habit of getting through twenty-five cigarettes and at least three cigars daily for the past twenty years!

But there must have been something funny about that cigarette, for it was after smoking part of it that there came the forgetfulness, the fogs of which he was still not able to pierce. The interval between his feeling queer and waking up in a strange room with his strength gone, was a complete blank.

That cigarette must have been doctored—but how? And by whom? Carthays? That was ridiculous, of course. Holliday, of Wimpole-street, had absolutely vouched for the fellow—besides, the Medical Superintendent would scarcely have dared such a risk.

Leaving out Carthays, it must have been someone else in the nursing-home—someone in the pay of the man who was now keeping him a prisoner. One of the nurses, perhaps.

That theory seemed fantastic, the more closely he studied it. And yet the box of cigarettes from which he had filled his case that afternoon was obviously the agent used. But the box had come from Susan. The last time she was

down she had promised to go to Jackson's in Piccadilly and order some Virginia No 1's to be posted.

A fresh idea came. Supposing that box had not been sent by Susan? Supposing she had forgotten in her anxiety the small commission? Then it could only mean that another person—an enemy—was so intimate with his personal habits that he was able to send a box of cigarettes which his victim specially liked and of which no suspicion would be entertained. Heddingly knew now that this someone was either The Disguiser himself or one of his associates.

The cigarette had been powerfully drugged. Even a few puffs had made him insensible, and whilst he was helpless he had been removed—no doubt by car. Bournemouth had many invalids: who would stop to ask any questions?

The devil of it was he did not know where he had been taken. He might be on the Continent, far away from where he could hope to gain any assistance. The Disguiser, it was certain, had made his plans carefully.

Heddingly tried to rise, but again his strength failed. Daunted in this, he took a long look round. The room was fairly large and was comfortable enough although somewhat barely furnished. But it was fitted with a door with an enormous lock and the one window had bars on the outside. His captor was taking no chances.

Although it was daytime, the room was dark. Then he saw the reason. Outside the window tall trees reared themselves, filling his prison with gloom.

#### CHAPTER VIII BUNNY LOOKS FOR A MAN'S EAR

THE thunderstorm which raged for an hour had given Susan a headache, and Chipstead dined alone at his Club—the Cherry-tree—that night. He was in a bad mood. Events seemed to be conspiring to make him evil-tempered. He knew that to surrender to any emotion in this way was sheer weakness, but the invisible devil squatting on his shoulders was difficult to shake off. The food was excellent, as usual, but to him it was tasteless, the Yquem Château, a favourite wine, sour and flat. He was decidedly pipped.

“Why—Bunny!”

A voice so cheery that at any other time he would have greeted the owner with a welcoming smile, followed quickly upon a shoulder-tap.

“Why the grouch?” asked the man who had stopped on his way through to the card-room.



Chipstead made an effort. He mustn't be an ungracious hound.

"This confounded weather's got me, Tommy," he replied; "I feel like a dog with a place he cannot scratch. Where are you off?"

"Just through to get a game of poker. I always recommend a poker-game when I feel like nothing on earth. If you've finished your grub, come along. But," pausing to take the other chair at the small table; "I thought you were in the States?"

"Came back only a day or so ago." Bunny did not enlarge upon this information. Tommy Boyne, good chap as he was, was a terrible gossip. Being an actor, it was only natural, perhaps, that he should be fond of talking. A New-Yorker, who had made good on this side, he swore that England was the greatest country in the world, and London the cheeriest town. In spite of being ragged mercilessly on the subject, he never swerved from this fealty, and gained added respect in the process. A man with countless friends and not an enemy. If it was his foible to attempt to chatter as foolishly as the reading public of America is persuaded that most decently-bred Englishman talk, he could be forgiven, for he had many countering good qualities.

At any other time, Bunny would have welcomed the other's society, but now Tommy's cheerful inanity—Boyne was a light comedian

by temperament as well as profession—failed to stir him out of his irritability.

“ I won’t play poker, thanks, Tommy—but stop and have some coffee.”

“ Righto, old bean ! ” replied Boyne, falling back upon his stock patter ; “ but why the furrowed brow, the feverish eye and the unsteady pulse ? Tell your Uncle Thomas all about it ! ”

Bunny yawned.

“ Don’t talk like a bit of decayed Debrett,” he said. “ Aren’t you in a show now ? ”

This time it was Boyne who yawned.

“ No. ‘ The Girl in the Lift ’ finished a month ago, after nine months’ run, and although I’ve waded through at least a hundred plays since, I haven’t been able to find anything to suit my personality.”

“ Personality, your hat ! ” scoffed Chipstead ; “ if you can’t get a play, why not fix up at one of the music-halls and give your world-famous impersonation of the English Duke’s son who never existed ? Go on exactly as you are ; you wouldn’t require any make-up.”

The actor accepted this sacrilegious satire good-humouredly, drank the coffee which had been brought, and rose.

“ You’re better left alone, Bunny,” he retorted ; “ something has given the jolly old liver a bit of a jolt. Try a trot round Hyde Park like I do when I feel out of condition, jumping the iron-fences on the way.” It was another

of Tommy Boyne's harmless idiosyncrasies to endeavour to get people to believe that he was a perfect whale on violent physical exercises. Although he was decidedly original in his stage-work, he had stolen thunder in this matter of strenuous exertion from the most famous of all London-established American light comedians and dancers. The latter now retired, confessed that he did not mind; "Tommy was a damned amusing cuss—and what did it matter, anyway, if the only exercise Boyne ever took was reaching out for fresh poker-chips?"

"Drop round one night and have a bite with me, Tommy," Bunny, penitent, proffered the invitation as the actor waved his hand in mock farewell.

"Not on your life, old bean—I should be afraid you'd do the Borgia on the Burgundy."

Alone once again, Chipstead decided to make a move. A sharp walk of four or five miles before dropping in at the *rendezvous* he had selected was preferable to idling the time away in a stuffy theatre or germ-laden cinema.

The rain had stopped, but the streets were still wet. The lamps gleamed like jewels, casting reflections on the stream of cars that flowed westward. It was the theatre-hour, and, waiting to cross Piccadilly Circus at the top of Lower Regent-street, he caught sight of flower-like women nestling contentedly by the side of their escorts, as the superb cars sped them noiselessly towards their destination. The thought of

Susan Courtenay as she looked at him only a few hours before caused his hand to tighten on the slender cane he carried. He was as courageous as the average fellow, he supposed, but he doubted if he would ever have the necessary nerve to put his fate to the test with this girl. And, in any case, there was a job of work to be done first.

His thoughts, as he walked rapidly up Piccadilly on the way to Hyde Park, where he could step it out as fast as he liked, concentrated on the visit of the man "Pearson" that morning. He wished now he could have arranged to have had that impertinent impostor followed. More information about a man who calmly adopted the identity of another person, and he an important commercial magnate, would have been welcome. He had lost a chance, perhaps, in not endeavouring to trace this bogus wholesale chemist. The chances were, however, that "Mr. Pearson" would try a fresh tactic, his first having failed. Bunny hoped he would.

The four-mile tramp in Hyde Park finished—Bunny barred the jumps—he returned to the brilliantly-lit Piccadilly and walking down some steps from the street level, entered an underground restaurant. The Wendover Grill is known all over the world, and if its fame is somewhat dubious, the affection returned exiles profess to have for it is increased rather than diminished on this account. Now that the

Metropolis has been cleaned up to the extent of temperance-hotels and cinemas being erected on the sites of former night-haunts, the Wendover takes on something of an oasis in a world of purity. It is said that isolated rubber-planters in the Straits Settlements and engineers in the African bush murmur the name in their sleep. . . .

Bunny turned into the Wendover for three reasons. The first was that he liked to be surrounded by a little wickedness, human evil being his life-study; the second was that he wanted to see if the *clientèle* of the famous grill had changed during his absence abroad; and the third was that he had an appointment.

The *maitre d'hôtel*, Tony, one of the few real "characters" left in London, gave the visitor a vociferous welcome. Tony knew many things—his knowledge of Metropolitan life was encyclopædic—but he had no substantial clue to Chipstead's real identity, and, like the generality of mankind, he was naturally curious. He knew Bunny ostensibly as a well-spoken, well-dressed, smooth-mannered man about town who was not afraid to spend money. If the air of authority and the keen eye ever made Tony pause, this shrewd Italian made a fresh resolve never to do anything to give this particular patron offence. One never knew. . . .

"You have been away, sare?" he now said, bowing ponderously.

"Egypt," lied Bunny. He followed the

guiding principle of never telling the truth when veracity was likely to be dangerous. He liked Tony personally, but he was aware also that the man was in the confidence of three-quarters of the crooks operating in London. One never knew. . . .

“Very glad to see you again, sare.” Tony signalled a waiter.

“This table reserved?” asked Bunny, pointing to one near the door. He knew that a very notorious blackmailer always sat at that table when in London, and, on the principle that all information had a sporting chance of being useful, he made the inquiry.

“No, you can have that table, sare,” said the *maître d’hôtel*, looking at Bunny intently as he produced pencil and small order-pad. He speculated whether, like the customary user of that table, the speaker selected this particular spot because it was so convenient from which to make a quick getaway.

“Something very light, Tony—and I am expecting a friend.”

“Very good, sare—some devilled kidneys, perhaps, an omelette and a bottle of white wine?”

“Excellent.”

The man departed without one backward glance. He had previously entertained the suspicion—the bare suspicion—that this customer might be connected with one of the special branches of the Police, but now Tony found

himself changing his view ; the other might be a crook like all the rest, only of a much higher type. A hotel jewel-thief, perhaps, or one of the best class of " Con " men.

Oblivious of the chief waiter's reflections, Bunny occupied himself in studying the various types with which the place was filled.

Ten minutes after he had given his order, a man who looked so nondescript that he might have been a leading Cabinet minister, walked leisurely into the room. Seeing Chipstead, he nodded imperceptibly and took the chair on the other side of the small table. This caused him to have his back to the majority of the company.

" I've ordered devilled kidneys and an omelette—suit you ? " said Chipstead.

David McNalty, acting chief of Sir Robert Heddingly's particular branch of the British Secret Service in the absence of its Head, grunted.

" Chickens' food ! I'm going to chew a steak. Any fresh facts, Bunny ? "

" One or two. I say, a great many of the old crowd are here—and looking damned hard in your direction, too ! "

" They would ! " growled McNalty, after giving his man's order to a waiter. " What did you choose Dan O'Brien's table for ? "

" For the same reason as the estimable Dan—because it's the easiest place in the room from which to slip away in case of necessity. "

“Expect any trouble, then?”

“I don’t know—possibly.”

“Then why come here—where every other crook in London can see you and pull a gun on you if they feel like it? Fool’s trick.” David McNalty, being one of those rare creatures a man who was really competent at his job, never minced his words. Even to his companion, for whom he had such a wholesome respect that it amounted almost to affection, he did not spare the barb.

“I came here, Davie, because I wanted to have a look at a man’s ear,” Chipstead answered.

It was frequently said in the Service that nothing could cause McNalty to raise an eyebrow, but now the Scotsman, an expression of almost comical bewilderment on his freckled face, stared across at his companion. McNalty was a graduate at Aberdeen University, but he was clearly puzzled.

“Does it hurt you very much, laddie?” he inquired.

“Does what hurt me?”

“The weakness from which you’re suffering.”

Bunny smiled.

“You don’t need me to tell you, Mac, that the one human feature which it is most difficult to disguise is the ear.”

“Now what in thunder do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I had hopes of seeing here this



evening a man whose ear is unmistakable. He called on me this morning, saying his name was Pearson. I quickly discovered that he was an impostor and therefore a crook. This is a rendezvous for crooks—even Tony, the *maitre d'hôtel*, isn't exactly an angel of light."

"By Heaven he isn't!" exploded the other. "I am merely waiting for a reasonable excuse to get that fellow locked up. But I don't want to listen to any of your troubles, Bunny; I have enough of my own just at the moment. Not a word has come through about Heddingly."

His companion did not appear to be listening. Chipstead had jumped up, and was staring hard across the crowded room.

"What the——?" started McNalty. But he might have addressed the empty air. For Bunny had gone, pushing his way without ceremony through the thronged, restricted space. There was a man in evening-dress on the opposite side of the room, whose appearance had attracted his keenest attention.

"Sare, your order is coming now." Tony, his dark-skinned face avid with something besides mere interest, had placed his brawny figure before Chipstead.

"Out of the way!" The order was so crisply delivered that it drew notice. A number of men, motionless before, rose and gathered round the *maitre d'hôtel*. One of these addressed Tony.

"Is this gentleman trying to cause any trouble?" he asked.

The tone was belligerent—markedly so. Bunny knew that this group, some of whom may have guessed who he was, were eager to pick a quarrel with him. His manner to them had been highly suspicious, and they intended to squash him before he could do any mischief. In the circumstances it would be rank foolhardiness to cause any further excitement.

“Trouble, be hanged!” he replied, looking the questioner between the eyes; “I suppose I am at liberty to cut across to have a word with a friend if I want to?”

“Oh, sure!” drawled the other, whilst gusts of silent, unpleasant laughter came from his companions: “only we, who use this place regularly, happen to be very quiet, sober-minded guys, and we don’t like any upset, see?”

Bunny “saw.” He could have given the speaker the title by which he was known to the majority of the Police Chiefs of Europe—“Big Jack Daltry.” He could have answered him, moreover, in a flow of unimpeachable Bowery crook-slang which might have astonished the recipient. A third inclination, and the strongest of the three, was to punch Daltry so hard on his sneering mouth that the confidence-trickster would remember the blow for the rest of his life.

“What’s this—a row? Any one insulting you, laddie?”

It was the unmistakable Scottish accent of

McNalty making the inquiry. Mac was slow to wrath, but when roused he was apt to be a demon in action. It would be extremely unfitting, however, for a man in his position to be dragged into a questionable restaurant fracas. Bunny took hold of himself.

"Everything's all right, old man," he replied, nudging McNalty with his elbow. "These gentlemen misunderstood—that was all."

"If that is all, we'd better be at finishing our suppers. My friend is apt to be a trifle impetuous on occasion, but he means no harm." The Secret Service official confided growlingly to the opposing group. "I trust you understand?"

"Oh, sure!" grinned Big Jack Daltry. The small, cunning eyes belied the apparent stupidity of the smile.

"Of course, I was a fool," confessed Chipstead in a whisper when they resumed their seats.

"The biggest kind," supplemented his companion; "it's not like you to make such a bad break. Who were you after, anyway?"

"A fellow sitting at a table on the other side of the room—I believe it was the man Pearson I've been telling you about."

McNalty speared a shred of potato.

"You recognised him by his ears, I suppose?" he asked.

"Principally," was the grave response; "don't forget I have very good eyesight, Mac."

“ Naturally the chap’s gone now,” said the Scotsman, proceeding with his meal.

“ Naturally. He didn’t pass us, however, so I presume there must be another exit. A pretty well disguised one, too. That crowd were wise to two things, evidently—first that the man I meant to speak to was one of them, and therefore to be protected, and secondly that I myself did not ‘belong.’ They were determined that I should not get at him.”

“ Humph ! ” growled McNalty. Putting down an empty tankard of beer with the observation : “ I hope they haven’t put any poison into that,” he echoed the view of Bunny by saying : “ I don’t see that we can do much good here—you’d better come back to my rooms and have a crack. I don’t mind telling you that this business is scaring me stiff. It’s that girl’s eyes I can’t stand. When Susan Courtenay looks at me, I feel that I’m personally responsible for the Chief being murdered.”

“ Not so loud,” advised Chipstead tersely ; “ I don’t agree with you at all—if England had gone all out for a win instead of playing for a draw, we should have beaten the South Africans in the third Test.”

“ Humph ! Perhaps you’re right, laddie,” replied McNalty in kind. Then waiting for Tony to move away out of ear-shot, he added in a very different tone : “ That skulking dago was listening for all he was worth.”

“ I guessed he was—that was why I talked

cricket. Fit? This atmosphere is bad enough to start an epidemic."

They rose.

The conversation with the acting Chief of X2 had been interesting but scarcely profitable. McNalty's men had continued to draw a blank, as the Scotsman had said; no news that was likely to be of any importance had come in throughout the day. Sir Robert Heddingly had vanished completely.

It was not because he did not have the utmost confidence in the Scotsman that Bunny kept the secret of the murdered man to himself. From the beginning he had had the presentiment that this mystery was to be very particularly a personal affair, and being for the present faced by an impenetrable fog himself, he did not see that McNalty would be in any better case if he told him. What he did say, however, was very pertinent.

"Bob Heddingly isn't dead, Mac," he told the Scotsman, as they sat in the latter's rooms in Dryden-court off Oxford-street; "he's being kept a prisoner."

McNalty took his pipe out of his mouth.

"You're far too fond, laddie, of these high-fetched notions. Why, pray, is the Chief being kept a prisoner? What's the sense of it?"

"If I could give you the answer to that, Mac, we need not do any more worrying. But I'll bet you a fiver I'm right."

McNalty was still inclined to be mildly sceptical.

“ You’re so clever, laddie, that perhaps you can even tell me the name of the gentleman responsible ? ”

“ Ever heard of The Disguiser ? ”

McNalty was roused.

“ The devil we chased all over Europe during the war ? Do I remember him ! ”

“ Chased—but never got. Look him up, Mac. He’s recently started business at the old stand. We thought he was laid by in lavender sheets, but he’s very much alive and kicking unless I’m mistaken.”

“ I’ve no need to look that fellow up,” was the answering growl. “ During all these years I’ve just had one small prayer. That was to get the chance to put these hands ”—he showed a couple of useful fists—“ round his throat ! But what’s the use of looking for a man who’s never been seen ?—there’s no one in the Department can swear to having met him.” With a sudden added interest : “ What makes you think it’s The Disguiser who’s got the Chief ? ”

Bunny told him about the mysterious telephone messages which Susan Courtenay had received prior to Heddingly’s disappearance.

McNalty made the obvious comment.

“ That may have been another crook putting on airs. A man like the Chief had more than one enemy, you must remember.”

"Granted. As you say, Mac, it may have been a bit of bravado on the part of someone else—an infinitely less dangerous person—but *I don't think so!*"

"Why don't you think so?"

"I've just got a hunch."

McNalty tapped finger-nails against the bowl of his pipe.

"You may be right, Bunny," he said gravely; "but it's bad news you're giving me."

"I know that, Mac. It means that we're up against the craftiest devil unhung. But I'm hoping that before long we shall get something to go on . . . You'll keep in touch with me?"

"Aye, never fear; I'll keep in touch with you, laddie. For it's my thinking that X2 will be wanting you badly." He broke off to add, "When that lassie looks into my face, I feel all ashamed."

"There's very little you need to be ashamed of—you've done everything possible."

"There's a lot more than that required in this job," complained the Scotsman, who, after a couple of whiskys, had become almost painfully gloomy.

That parting remark had been made a full hour before. Bunny had not hurried back to St. James's street; he had lingered on his way home in pursuance of a pre-arranged policy.

It was well past midnight when he turned into the main hall of the block where he had his chambers. His own rooms were in darkness, but this was only to be expected, seeing he had given Brooks the night off.

He fitted the key into the lock of the hall-door as quietly as possible and then gently turned the handle. He stepped into his domain cautiously; if he were right in his guess, something had happened there that night—or would happen.

He waited, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. But a dense stillness was on everything. The suite of rooms might have been a tomb.

No one had come yet, apparently. Bunny reached out to turn the electric-light switch. There was no grip in the turn; and no result; the hall was still gloom-enshrouded.

The next moment he had stepped forward. One hand clutched the handle of the curious cane he carried, the other gripped the stick about nine inches from the ferrule. What he had anticipated, had happened; someone had paid a burglarious visit to his rooms that night and, as a precautionary measure, had tampered with the light. Well . . .

From behind came a light, scuffling sound, such as a furtive-footed animal might have made. Bunny wheeled—but he was too late; a hand, remarkable for its nervous strength, clutched at his throat, and a knee, equally



remarkable for its bony qualities, struck him in the pit of the stomach.

He was so sick with pain for a few moments that all he could do was to clinch with his foe like a boxer who is hard-pressed. But the fellow was like an eel. And he was mad with either rage or fear—perhaps both. He twisted out of Bunny's grip and backed. Rushing forward, Chipstead's foot slipped on a rug, and he lurched sideways. This mishap possibly saved his life, for as he fell he felt a fierce rush of air whistle past his left ear. The intruder had tried to smash his head in with a loaded stick or weighted sling.

It only required this additional evidence to cause Chipstead to go all out. As he sprawled on the floor, he drove his clenched fist into the back of one of the thug's knees—a vital nervous region, as every schoolboy knows—with the result that the man lurched forward automatically and then crashed over Bunny's prostrate form.

Before he could spring up, Chipstead was at him, eager for the "kill." From now on it was pure dog-fight. There were occasions when Bunny, the exquisite, was not above descending to an extremely primitive level. The atavistic strain must have been strongly developed in him, for there was nothing he enjoyed now and then more than a tooth-and-claw scrap. He had abandoned his cane and the other had evidently dropped his improvised club, for both

hands were trying—unsuccessfully—to get at Bunny's throat.

Chipstead had the advantage, but the other fought like a desperate beast. Neither said a word, but the struggle in the darkness was all the more grim on account of the silence. Twice Bunny thought he had stunned the man, and twice the other rallied sufficiently to snap with his teeth at Chipstead's hand. Once he drew blood, a fact which did not endear him to the owner of the hand.

Eventually, however, he lay still. A short, vicious jab in the stomach had applied the closure. He had put up a herculean effort, and Bunny was not sorry to call it a day. He was badly spent himself.

After making sure that the man was really "out," he pushed open the sitting-room door. There the electric-light switch, strangely enough, had not been tampered with. But the place was in the wildest confusion. Chairs were overthrown, a table lay on its side, the contents of a roll-top desk which stood in one corner were scattered all over the room as though the burglar had flung them away from him in fury; even the carpet had been rolled up at each corner. If the small safe in the wall had not been constructed so cunningly by a craftsman, that even at close quarters it could be guaranteed to escape observation, Chipstead was certain it, too, would have been attacked.

The ordinary householder, coming upon such

a scene of wanton mischief, after narrowly escaping serious injury himself, would have turned the air blue with his remarks, but Bunny smiled. Slowly the evidence he required was being supplied. What had happened that night was only one link in the chain with which, if the gods were well-disposed, he intended to cage that very dangerous enemy of Society whose humour it was to call himself The Disguiser.

Walking out into the hall, he caught hold of the still insensible man and pulled him into the room. Then he acted the Good Samaritan to the extent of pouring a stiff "go" of honest liqueur brandy between the clenched teeth.

Let it be said, this was real brandy—not the rubbish passed off as cognac in England in these Dora-ridden days; it had the gathered strength of years—and it performed its office. The man opened his eyes and then found his voice. True, he used it first for gasping and secondly for blaspheming, but any uneasy premises Bunny might have had were effectively scotched; the burglar was alive and, given half a chance, quite able, apparently, to renew his kicking—not to mention his other unpleasant little vices of biting, gouging and sand-bagging.

"You'll keep just where you are, my friend," were the words Bunny used to quieten him. "As you may have noticed, this revolver is

pointed straight at you. It is loaded in each one of its six chambers. Nothing would give me greater joy than to pump all six bullets into you. Then I should ring up the police, who would believe my story that I had killed a burglar in self-defence—you've left plenty of evidence here, let me remind you."

"What's the idea?" growled the man, from the easy-chair in which Chipstead had placed him.

"The idea is this: You answer the few questions which I propose to put to you—and I shall be able to tell if you are speaking the truth—or I swear I'll use this gun on you first, and hand you over to the police afterwards."

"And what happens if I speak the truth?"

"I will decide later," compromised Bunny. He had no actual intention of living up to his threat; he had never shot a sitting bird in his life, but he was anxious to impress his visitor.

In this he had apparently succeeded. The man, a typical crook of the fast-dying desperado-looking type, had evidently had enough fighting for one evening. He rubbed the palm of one huge hand against the other.

"I'll let you have the straight goods, guv'nor," he started in a marked Cockney accent that Bunny decided was too good to be assumed; "I haven't been out of 'stir' a month, and I was that hungry I could have eaten an elephant

raw ; that's the truest gospel. I've been keeping an eye on this block of flats for a week or so, and when I noticed that servant of yours leaving to-night, I thought I'd give my luck a run. But it was damned well out again ! ”

“ What did you expect to find here ? ”

“ Oh, a bit of silver that I could have pawned. ”

“ And how did you get in ? ”

The man smiled at the artlessness of such a question.

“ Picking a lock isn't much trouble to me, gov'nor, let me tell you, even if it is a double Yale. You wouldn't be too hard on a chap that's had a cruel run of bad luck lately, I know, gov'nor. I can see you're a sportsman. I've made a bit of a mess here, I know, but I've not pinched a thing—you can search me if you like. ”

He was about to stand up when a movement of the revolver caused him to abandon the idea rather precipitately.

“ Aren't you going to be a sportsman, gov'nor ? ” he inquired. His tone was plaintive ; he hoped he wasn't going to be disappointed in the character of the man he addressed.

Chipstead's reply was disconcerting.

“ Sit quite still—and begin to tell the truth ! ”

The burglar's expression now became very pained.

“Tell the truth, gov'nor—what the hell have I been doing for the last ten minutes, then?”

“Spinning a lot of clumsy lies.”

“S'elp me! If I never move from here——!”

“That will do! I'll give you three minutes—at the end of that time, unless you come across with the truth, a call will be put through to the nearest Police-station—Vine street isn't far away, you know—and you won't be in a condition to avoid arrest. All I want to know is the answer to just two questions. When I get these, and I believe them to be the truthful ones, you can go.”

A gleam showed in the unpleasant eyes.

“You swear that, gov'nor?”

“Yes—I will give you my word.”

“And you won't lay any complaint afterwards?”

“No.”

“Then fire away! I thought from the first that you were a sportsman!”

“We'll forget the compliments. Now, pay attention to what I am saying—and *look me straight in the face!*”

An added tenseness had entered the room.

“Look me straight in the face!” repeated Chipstead.

The man's shifty gaze wavered. Then the eyes concentrated as closely as was possible upon the speaker.

“How long have you been working for The Disguiser, Clements?”

It was as though the man had been struck across the face with a whip. He sprang up, a flood of frightful oaths pouring from his lips, which had become flecked with foam. Then, quickly came the reaction; with a frightened snarl, he subsided into a chair.

“Who the hell are you calling Clements?” he asked in a voice harsh and cracked with fear.

“You! I recognised your face at once. You once worked for a man named Osgard in the Courcy-court burglary. You got three years for that—and will get another five for this burglary with violent bodily assault, if you don't come clean and tell the truth. How long have you been working for The Disguiser?”

Clements gnawed his lower lip with a broken tooth.

“I don't know who the 'ell you mean,” he faltered; “never heard of a guy who called himself that.”

“You're lying again. Come clean or there'll be a five years stretch waiting for you!”

The man hesitated only a moment.

“Shoot, then, and be damned to you!” he snarled; “but let me tell you this: as sure as you're sitting there he'll get you for it! You send me to clink, and where will he send you?—tell me that!”

“ You admit, then, that you are working for a crook who calls himself The Disguiser, and that you came here to try to steal something which you were to hand over to him ? ”

“ I admit nothing. If you don't want a slit in your throat or a hole in your head, the less you know about him the better. You won't get nothing out of me.”

“ I didn't think you were a coward, Clements.”

“ Coward be —— ! ” The expression was unprintable. “ No, I'm not a coward ; I shouldn't have taken this job on if I hadn't had my nerve about me, but I want to go on living—see ? ”

“ Do you mean that this man would get you even if you were in prison ? ”

“ He'd get me anywhere if I opened my mouth too wide. In clink or out of it—what does the place matter to *him* ? I've heard of you, Mr. Blooming Chipstead—you're supposed to be a bit of a private 'tec, aren't you ? One of the la-de-dah boys who swank about being in the Secret Service. Secret Service ! You won't believe it, but this—this fellow we're talking about,” perhaps it was habit which made the speaker look cautiously round, “ knows all your potty little secrets ! I tell you now, giving you fair warning, keep away from him. Don't try to do *him* any dirty, or you'll be dead so quick you won't have time to get insured ! ”

Bunny smiled.



"I wonder at such a crackajack crook employing a man like you, Clements. That proves he is only an ordinary thug, after all!"

He meant to provoke the other, and he succeeded.

"Ordinary thug, is he? Well, have it your own way, you forsaken fool! When I see that fat-bellied servant of yours wearing *crêpe*, I shall have the laugh! Let me tell you that this fellow is so 'ordinary' that no one ever sees him, just the same as no one knows who he really is! I got my orders through—well, never mind who. I'm not even sure that it was The Disguiser"—he dropped his voice to a whisper at the mention of the name—"who put this second bloke on to me; I only guessed from a word or two the other let drop—Gawd! I'm talking too much; that's what I'm doing—" He broke off to glare at Chipstead who was still smiling.

"Talking too much like a kid who's afraid to go home in the dark!" taunted Bunny. He rose as though wearied.

"Get on out of here, you poor mug!" he ordered, pointing to the door; "go away and frighten yourself to death! I'm certain if I sent for the police you'd die of heart-failure."

Again it was his intention to provoke the man into further speech and again he succeeded.

“Blast you!” roared the burglar, cut to the raw by the scathing words; “but your time will come! You’re down on his books. You’ve got something—I was told to search for a small oilskin packet which he wants. That means that unless he gets it, your number is up. Oh, I know what you’re thinking—you’re thinking that I’m talking through my hat; that what I’m telling you is so much hot air—but you’ll be saying something different before long.” The man was undoubtedly serious—so serious, in fact, that he appeared to have forgotten everything about his own position. The fact was impressive.

“Well, in any case, I’m very much indebted to you, Clements,” remarked Chipstead with a change of tone.

The burglar gave a short duck of his head.

“Killing’s a thing I’ve always drawn the line against. Every man to his job, of course, but I’ve always had enough sense to keep to plain ‘breaking and entering.’ To-night, I know, I got nasty; but that was because I was scared stiff—not because of being caught—no, it wasn’t that, although you may think so—but because I was afraid of what might happen to me when I got back, and said that I’d failed on this job. If I hadn’t been hungry, and right up against it, I’d never have taken it on . . . the very thought of this fellow we’ve been talking about makes me shiver.”

This wasn't acting; the man was sincere. His voice held a genuine terror.

"But you said just now that you've never seen him," put in Chipstead.

Clements, looking sideways, lowered his voice to a whisper.

"You don't have to see him to be afraid, gov'nor," he replied; "the very mention of his name is enough. If half the stories one hears about him are true, he's worse than a devil. That's why I hate to have to go back and tell the second bloke—the one who gave me this job to do—that I came away with nothing."

Bunny Chipstead looked at the speaker intently for several moments. Then he did a surprising thing. Walking across the room, he pressed a hidden spring. Part of the wall opened, disclosing a secret safe.

"You can say, Clements, that you found the place where the package ought to have been, but that it was empty."

"Well, strike me pink!" exclaimed the burglar.

"Still hungry?" asked Bunny.

"Starving."

"On the off-chance of you occasionally speaking the truth, here's a pound-note—now clear out!"

"Do you mean it?"

"Certainly. Oh, one moment, Clements."

The man stopped.

“If ever you should meet your friend, The Disguiser, give him my compliments and say that I hope to have the pleasure of calling on him one day soon.”

## CHAPTER IX

## THE FANTASTIC UNKNOWN

MEANWHILE, the World—that great World of Crime which is a separate and all-powerful Universe of its own—was waiting. For THE NEWS—the greatest news since the thefts in the Louvre, the planning of which, it was said, had been done by the same master-mind—had spread. By word of mouth, by cryptic messages through the air and under the sea, the word had been flashed throughout Crookdom that The Disguiser was in business again. Mysteriously he had reappeared as mysteriously he had vanished. No one knew just how, but the information was sufficient.

When Napoleon escaped from Elba, the very fact was enough ; who wasted time by inquiring the means ?

Of course, there were stories—legions, multitudes of stories. Some said that the man whose real name no one actually knew, although many made false claims, had retired to a

monastic retreat in Sicily, upon the death of a favourite mistress, and that he had spent the intervening time either in brooding or in thinking out fresh schemes ; others averred that he had been actually captured by the Paris Police through the treachery of an associate and that he had been sent to Cayenne from which living-hell he had now escaped, thirsting for revenge upon all recognised authority ; yet again others swore they had unimpeachable evidence that, for a reason even more fantastic than the story itself, The Disguiser had enlisted in the Foreign Legion for the customary initial period of five years, had signed on again for another five, but had grown suddenly weary, and, after incredible hardships, had escaped to Marseilles, in the criminal quarter of which he had recruited a new band with whom he had sworn to terrorise the whole of Europe.

Incredible tales—and yet, those who knew The Disguiser as well as he could be known, stated that the incredible was generally the only thing that could be truthfully connected with this fantastic figure.

But one fact was certain : that no one knew his secret. Even his nationality could only be guessed at. The majority said he was a renegade Frenchman ; which accounted, they maintained, for some of his qualities : his amazing audacity, his phenomenal quick-wittedness, his recklessness towards any danger, and also the damning circumstance that he was infinitely

the most dangerous agent employed by the Central Powers during the War.

He moved in a veil of mystery. None of his associates had ever seen his face; he always appeared before them masked and cloaked. Thus none could even guess his age. He spoke eight languages as fluently and so accent-less that he might have been a native of each and every country. Apart from his linguistic gifts, he had abundant skill. Thus, with his well-known ability to disguise himself at will, he had become almost a legendary creature.

And, now that he was "working" again, thousands waited breathlessly for the outcome. The Underworlds of at least three great Capitals were agog.

Much of this Sir Robert Heddingly, still a close prisoner in that gloom-shadowed room, guessed. But one fact was beyond conjecture; he knew that The Disguiser had returned for the principal purpose of having revenge upon him. He was in the man's power. Apart from Susan, this did not perhaps matter overmuch—a man occupying his position was bound to have dangerous enemies, and the world was full of what the superior critics scoffingly referred to as melodrama—but what did matter was that he—the Head of an important, a vitally important branch of the British Secret Service—was doomed to be a pawn in the hands of this super-criminal whose brain he knew was efficient to

a deadly extent. The thought made him sweat with fresh fear.

Two days had passed since that interview with the bizarre man who had imprisoned him. At least, to the best of his belief it was two days. But in that darkened room from which even in the daytime, God's light was barred by those gloomy, over-shadowing trees, it was difficult to mark the passing of time. He was unable to sleep, and day and night seemed practically the same. The only difference was that a feeble gas-jet burned at night, but this fitful illumination was almost worse than no light at all, since it was at the other end of the room, and insufficient to read by even if he had been supplied with books or papers.

The prostrating weakness which kept him to his bed as securely as though chains were pressing him down, had become greater. How he longed for strength! Even sufficient energy to have been able to move about the room, testing the security of the door, climbing upon a chair to try how strong the bars of the window were would have satisfied him, but to feel like a sick, dying animal cut off from even his own help. . . . It was maddening—so maddening that he wondered he had not already been driven insane.

Only one thing broke the deadening monotony. Three times a day his meals were brought.

Meals! The Disguiser had a biting ironic humour; he persisted in making his captive

regard himself as an invalid when it was the damnable drugs that had been used on him which sapped all his strength. So what was brought on a cheap tin-tray were bowls of arrow-root and bread-and-milk. Never anything else.

Heddingly loathed the sight and the smell of both these insipid concoctions, but he forced himself to eat, because he knew that if he did not he would die. And he wasn't going to die! He was going to live to have the laugh of the man who had treated him with such contumely. He was going to live in order to see The Disguiser placed behind such strong prison-bars that even he would not know how to escape. He was going to live so that the great *coup* of which this criminal had boasted would be thwarted and come to nothing. The thought had come at first that his food might be saturated with the very drugs which were robbing him of his strength, but he had to risk that. So he ate whilst the eyes of his gaoler never left his face.

A curious person, this gaoler—curious and repulsive. The man was a deaf-mute, or pretended to be, and the only sound that ever left his lips was a harsh, hideous cackle. Some affliction had twisted this creature's mouth on one side so that he seemed to be always making a wry, mocking grimace. Heddingly loathed him at first sight, and this hatred became a devouring passion before the second day had passed.



He had fought down this dislike for policy's sake, and had endeavoured to establish some sort of communication with the man. But the only answer he had received to the question he put was that dreadful cackle, which was worse than any spoken refusal or threat. Then he had made motions. He conveyed the fact that he wished to have pen and paper. The man, after a thoughtful pause, produced a piece of paper and a pencil from a pocket in his shabby clothes and placed them in Heddingly's hands.

Filled with a hope which he knew to be foolish but which he could not repress, the prisoner wrote: *Tell me where I am.*

The mute looked, read, but the only reply was that nerve-racking cackle. When urged by Heddingly to write an answer he shook his head.

After that Heddingly gave up the attempt. The man was evidently not to be bought or bribed; he had been chosen too well for that. Perhaps it was because of his infirmity that he had been selected by The Disguiser; he could be guaranteed not to gabble away any secrets.

In any case, Heddingly could expect no hope from this quarter. He could not even learn where he was—whether this was England or some foreign country.

He returned to his oft-repeated prayer—that Bunny Chipstead would be able to get a clue.

. . . Bunny would probably be arriving from Paris very soon now, and, directly he heard the news, he would get busy.

But even this hope died almost as quickly as it was born. The former fear returned. The Disguiser would know all about Chipstead—hadn't Bunny been with him his chief antagonist in the past?—and he would set a trap for him. Bunny, unsuspecting. . . .

Chipstead had sent a wire and Matthews had met him with a car at the Bournemouth central station. The man looked worried.

"No, I haven't any news, Mr. Chipstead," he said in answer to the other's look of inquiry; "this business is a nightmare to me, and the sooner I'm taken off it, the better I shall be pleased. When I think of what the Chief may be going through perhaps at this very moment and I not able to raise a finger to help him, I wonder I keep sane."

"There are others who feel like that, Matthews," was the reply, "myself amongst them. Waiting is always the difficult part, but if we wait long enough, something will happen—it always does." Quite a lot had happened to himself, for instance, during the past few days and he knew that if he could only disentangle these events light would emerge.

"May I ask why you have come down, Mr. Chipstead?" enquired Matthews.

"I want to feel that I am on the spot."

During the night he had been unable to sleep. Thoughts rioted in his brain. He could not help imagining that the enemy, working in his hidden stronghold, was busy making plans for him now that he had Heddingly safe. The Disguiser, it seemed, wished to keep him in London. Many things pointed to that—the visit of “Pearson” particularly. This visit could so easily have been a “blind”; its object to try to induce him to believe he had a clue.

The other's line of campaign was by no means clear, but he had not been able to rid his mind of the impression that so long as he was in London he was working at the wrong end. He had not attended the inquest on the man whose package was now in the best possible keeping—the strong room at Bunny's bank—but he did not anticipate that he would have gained any useful information if he had gone. The Disguiser had dealt with this man, and he was not likely to take any further interest in him. On the other hand, his own presence at the official inquiry could not have failed to be noted. The verdict had been the expected one: Murder by some person or persons unknown.

Bunny was recalled to himself by the answering remark of Matthew's.

“I hope you won't take it as any disrespect to yourself, Mr. Chipstead, when I point out that I have been ‘on the spot’ for several days, and, as you already know, I haven't

been able to get the first glimmering of an idea of what really happened."

"No reflection on you, Matthews—you ought to know that. But I was beginning to feel that certain events were being staged for my special benefit in London and so I came down here. Now I'm going straight away to have another talk with the Medical Superintendent fellow."

Matthews shook his head. If he had not known Chipstead's record in the Department, he might have imagined that the other was a fool. Why, he had been on to the Medical Superintendent of the nursing-home day and night himself. "I'm afraid he won't be able to give you anything fresh," he commented; "I was speaking to him again only this morning, and, although he was polite enough, he said at the end that he would be profoundly thankful if he wasn't bothered any further."

"Well, I'm afraid he must be bothered just once more," said Chipstead, getting into the car.

Outside the nursing-home, Matthews got down.

"You won't want me," he said, "and there's just one more channel I should like to explore. I don't suppose for a moment it will lead anywhere, but if it does I'll ring you up at the hotel to-night."

Chipstead nodded.

"Very well." He tried to put some cordiality

into the words. The other had had a thankless task, and he could understand how dispirited he had become. Chasing shadows for a week was enough to get on any man's nerves.

Dr. Carthays was inclined to be curt.

"With the best will in the world, Mr. Chipstead, I don't see how I can possibly help you any further," he said.

"If you will, you can answer just one question: did Sir Robert receive any parcels on the last day he was here?"

"I really cannot say offhand, but I will make inquiries." He was back within five minutes.

"I find that a small package arrived for Sir Robert Heddingly on the morning of his disappearance."

The questioner became alert.

"Do you know what it contained?"

"I understand from the nurse who handed it to him that it was a box of Sir Robert's favourite cigarettes sent him by his ward, Miss Susan Courtenay."

"Did he tell her so?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, doctor; I won't worry you any further."

The two shook hands and parted.

THROUGH the thick belts of woodland came the strong air of the sea. For many miles Chipstead had driven the borrowed car through the heart of that ancient part of England called, curiously enough, the New Forest. He had sought the quietude of this gigantic stretch of wooded pleasaunce for the purpose of doing some clear thinking. An excellent lunch of cold beef and beer had been obtained at the famous *Cat and Fiddle Inn*, and then he had given the engine its head and allowed it to take him where it willed.

And now he was lost.

The lane into which he had turned proved to be little better than a rough cart-track, and dusk was coming rapidly. What was more, a storm seemed to be brewing. The sun was sinking into an angry, purplish sky; the branches of the trees on either side of the roadway were trembling as though in fear.

He must get back. He might be miles from any decent shelter, and he suddenly felt tired. Moreover, he wanted creature comforts—a coal fire, a hot bath, a change of clothes. Wrestling with the problem that entirely filled his mind, he had allowed himself to come too far.

Delightful in the daylight, this place showed itself to be eerie now that dark had come. The wind, whistling through the trees, got on his

nerves ; it became a myriad-voiced warning : " Get away ! . Get away ! " it seemed to say.

He did not need any urging. Rustic beauty was all right in the sunshine, but it took on an entirely different aspect when night fell, bringing on its sable wings the uneasy breath of an approaching thunderstorm.

But how was he to get out of this cul-de-sac ? It led nowhere, apparently.

Deliberating the question, driving the car very slowly forward, he was thankful to see a figure suddenly loom out of the rapidly-gathering gloom. Where this man had come from he had no idea, but it was sufficient that he was there.

" I say, can you tell me where I am ? " he asked, drawing alongside.

He had scarcely uttered the words before he realised that the man he had interrogated was a curious person to be standing motionless at the side of a cart-track in the heart of an English forest. He looked more like a character out of a Continental Opera, for he wore a voluminous cloak and a deep-brimmed sombrero hat. Still, he might be some local eccentric—a poet " dressing " the part, or ultra-modernist artist. He remembered once reading that one of the high lights of Chelsea was fond of roaming through the New Forest as a change from the Café Napoleon in Piccadilly Circus. Perhaps this quaintly-garbed individual was he ?

It required only a second glance, however, to

realise that this human oddity was even more abnormal than his attire suggested. Some affliction had changed the lower part of his face so that the mouth was all askew—twisted on to one side. The effect was singularly repellent. Perhaps it was because of this natural feeling of repulsion that Chipstead had the notion that the man was regarding him with malice.

“Can you kindly tell me where I am?” he repeated.

At first he thought that the man had broken into a mocking laugh. But this sound issuing from the twisted mouth was not a laugh—at least, if so, it was the queerest laugh he had ever heard made by a human being. It was the harshest sort of cackle, absolutely unintelligible and hideous to hear.

Chipstead became angry. He had to fight down an almost intolerable aversion. He was sorry for the other’s affliction, and yet . . .

“What are you laughing at?” he said.

The dreadful cackle broke out afresh. Then Bunny arrived at the truth: the man was a mute: he was trying to answer, and this unpleasant sound was the best he could manage.

“Sorry,” he muttered, and while the eyes of the man appeared to glare with added malice, he produced fountain-pen and the back of an envelope. He did not care to take his eyes off the other, but he wrote hurriedly: “*Can you direct me to the main road leading to Bournemouth?*”



He handed the envelope to the man, who read the words, and then pointed in what Bunny, for all his lack of knowledge, felt convinced was the wrong direction: unless his sense of direction, usually so reliable, was utterly at fault, the man was pointing *away* from Bournemouth. Curious!

He took the envelope from the other and wrote: "*Are you sure?*"

The reply the man made to this was to tear up the paper into small pieces and scatter them to the winds. He performed the action with a gesture of unmistakable contempt. Then, turning on his heel, he strode rapidly off into the darkness. As he disappeared, there returned to Chipstead the sound of that familiar harsh cackle.

"Touchy devil!" muttered Bunny.

The words did not convey all that was in his mind, however. The man's manner throughout their short interview had been tainted by something more definite than the sensitiveness which an afflicted person might feel in meeting a stranger. It had been quite openly hostile—that final cackle had held a note of menace.

But for two factors—the man's probably unbalanced condition, and that he could not waste the time—he would have followed the other. Of course, such a procedure would have bordered on the ridiculous, seeing that no conversation could have been held, but . . .

Dismissing the subject with an effort, Bunny shrugged his shoulders, and re-started the car. But the bonnet was headed in the opposite direction to the one to which the man had pointed.

Chipstead had never been bothered by an over-abundance of imaginative dread leading to nerves, but he felt now a strange sense of foreboding. Meeting that man had been singular, to say the least. Occupied with thoughts of his old friend all the afternoon, he realised now that the danger which had overtaken Bob Heddingly was also certainly stalking him. And a nice spot to meet it, this . . .

To complete the picture, something went wrong at this moment with the internal arrangement of the car, and he had to get out and see to it.

It was whilst he was putting the finishing touches to the minor repair that a most remarkable thing occurred. Straightening himself up from re-placing one of the plugs, he suddenly felt his hat shift on his head. Some instinct which he did not stop to analyse made him take the hat off and examine it.

Bunny's eyes wrinkled beneath a heavy frown. This place *was* dangerous: some one had shot at him—shot, with intent to kill!

There was no doubt about it: through the low crown of the felt was a small, perfectly

round hole, quite evidently made by either a revolver or a rifle-bullet.

What the devil—? Then realisation returned swiftly. The shot had come from the left hand side of the road, the direction in which the man with the twisted mouth had disappeared. Was it the mute who had tried to kill him? If so, why? Was the fellow mad?

Crouched low in his seat, he urged the car to greater speed. He was burning with rage, but all the same he knew discretion to be much the better part of valour in this particular instance. To go stalking, weaponless, a homicidal maniac in wooded country every inch of which was strange to him, was not to be considered.

Coming after a while to a network of turnings, he decided to go to the right, and presently had the satisfaction of finding himself upon a road which after his recent wanderings represented comfort. An Automobile Association Scout, passing on a motor-cycle, stopped as Chipstead hailed him. Here was fresh good fortune.

“Am I right for Bournemouth?”

The man gave the information in the admirably direct manner of his class.

“I suppose you know this part?” Bunny went on, after thanking him.

“Well, I ought to, sir. I was born at Beaulieu a few miles from here.”

Bunny hesitated a moment and then took the plunge.

“A couple of miles back there,” he pointed to where he had come, “I met a remarkable sort of fellow. He was wearing a cloak——”

“Where did you say you saw him, sir?” The motor-scout’s manner was agitated.

“About a couple of miles back there.”

“What was the man like, sir? Did he seem strange?”

“He was so strange that when I asked him the way to Bournemouth he merely laughed. The fellow was repulsive-looking; his mouth was twisted on one side and he didn’t seem sane.”

“That must have been the escaped lunatic, sir.” The scout wheeled his cycle about. “We’ve been asked to keep a sharp look-out by the Asylum authorities. If you’ll excuse me, sir, I’ll be getting in touch with the police.”

The man gone, after making a respectful salute, Bunny drove slowly on. The news he had just heard might be the explanation. But the experience was so strange that he was not completely satisfied. Why should an escaped lunatic be carrying a revolver? And why should the man have a special grudge against himself? Of course, this might be explained by the other’s twisted mind thinking he had come to catch him. Hang the fellow, anyway, ruining a perfectly good hat.

On arriving back at the hotel, almost the first person he saw was a girl whose smile sent his heart thudding against his ribs.

## CHAPTER XI

## INTERLUDE

“WHAT on earth does this mean?” he asked. He seemed to be stricken with the worst kind of banality whenever he looked into Susan Courtenay’s eyes, but he was powerless to prevent it. A thudding heart probably conduced to that unfortunate condition.

She made a slight *moue*.

“Am I in the way? Tell me if I am.”

Bunny became so vehement that the hall porter looked up from the letters he was sorting.

“In the way? I——” He broke off. “How dare you suggest such a thing?” Chipstead flattered himself the mock anger was most effective. “You can’t understand how pleased I am to see you, Miss Courtenay. Believe that. But why on earth are we standing here?”

Her cheeks were softly glowing as, with a quiet touch on her arm, he piloted her to the big lounge. They found a quiet corner and

sat down on two comfortable saddlebag chairs.

“ You’ve had tea ? ”

Susan flushed him a look.

“ No—I thought I would wait for you. They told me you were expected back . . . do you mind ? ”

The thudding sensation had returned with such violence that his nerves were unsteady. To rally himself a little, he touched the bell. Then :

“ If I had all the world to choose from, you would be the one person I should like to watch at this particular moment pouring out my tea.”

Once again the rose-leaf cheeks took on a deeper hue.

“ A charming compliment—quite the nicest I think, that I have ever heard,” she commented; “ so that the onlookers shall not think I am doing it for the first time, please tell me about the sugar and milk ! ” Her smile was almost mischievous.

He caught her mood. This sense of intimacy—although the lounge was reasonably full, he had the feeling of being alone with his companion—was delightful. Delightful—but intoxicating. He told himself he would have to keep himself under strict control. This joy brought its penance.

“ Milk but no sugar,” he replied.

She nodded, and, the tray having arrived,

busied herself with arranging its contents after the immemorial manner of woman.

Chipstead watched, absorbed. How beautifully moulded her hands were, how delicately slim her fingers! Beautifully kept, too, not with too obvious manicuring, but with a refinement in keeping with the rest of her personality. He felt he wanted to kiss those immaculate finger-tips.

"I suppose you are still wondering why I am here?"

Bunny had announced that the tea was to his perfect liking, and they had reached the first piece of toast stage.

"If I wonder at all, it is at my good fortune," he told her.

She looked him straight in the face.

"I am beginning to think that something must have happened to you in America, Mr. Chipstead?"

"Why?"

"Because you have developed a quite unexpected capacity for paying delightful compliments. I don't remember you having the gift before you went away."

The thudding sensation was increasing in violence, but he gave her back level look for level look.

"I had the gift but not the courage," he said.

"Perhaps practice supplied the necessary courage, Mr. Chipstead?"

“That’s nonsense, of course—just as ridiculous, if I may say so, as you calling me ‘Mr. Chipstead’.”

“But—” She half turned away to replace her cup.

“What ought I to call you?” she asked. The pulse in her throat was throbbing; she hoped he would not notice it. This conversation was too dangerously sweet, and she ought to have stopped it. But if her head told her this, her heart was beating out an entirely different message.

“My friends, as you know, call me ‘Bunny’.”

“I know. But—” She stopped again. “It doesn’t seem right—for me——”

“Because I am so dreadfully aged—is that the reason?”

Her reply carried conviction.

“Why will you persist in considering yourself old? Aren’t you in the very prime of life?”

“Am I?” How unbridgable to him seemed the eighteen years that divided their ages!

“I have always understood that forty is the best time in a man’s life—Daddy used to say so,” she quickly added; “and he told me something else: he said that you were the fittest man he had ever known. So,” with a wholly charming air of determination, “if you dare ever to refer to yourself as being old again, I shall refuse to listen!”

“Very well, then. It must be on your own



head. I promise never to mention my alarming decrepitude again, providing——”

“So you make a condition?”

“I do.”

“And it is——?”

“That you drop the ‘Mr. Chipstead’ forthwith.” He leaned towards her. “In spite of the sudden and unexpected capacity to pay compliments, I’m not much of a talker.”

“Men who do things are seldom talkers,” she interrupted.

He waved the tribute on one side.

“Can I call you Susan?” he asked bluntly. She smiled straight into his eyes.

“Of course,” she said.

“And you will drop the ‘Mr. Chipstead’?”

“If you really wish it, Bunny.”

It seemed to him as though a hidden orchestra of silken-stringed lutes had commenced to play.

“Thank you,” he replied.

“And now that momentous question has been settled, let me tell you why I was inconsiderate enough to follow you to Bourne-mouth. I felt I wanted to be on the spot.”

“I left a message in case you should ring up.”

“I know. Brooks told me.”

“Since— since—,” —her voice faltered a little, before regaining strength, “this has happened, I feel I hate London. It makes me feel afraid.”

“You mustn’t feel afraid; this thing will not touch you.” Yet even as Chipstead gave

the reassurance he felt himself to be lying. Perhaps, in the eyes of The Disguiser, Susan was almost as important a factor as Sir Robert Heddingly himself.

"Being with you helps," she confessed; "so please do not send me back."

"I had no intention of doing so," was the quick response. "I did not invite you to come with me, Susan, because—well, Bournemouth has rotten memories for you, hasn't it?"

She clasped her hands—the hands which Bunny considered so beautiful.

"I have already told you, Bunny"—the name was spoken without any hesitation—"that I felt I wanted to be on the spot. Here I feel I can breathe, but there is something stealthy in London. I know that must sound ridiculous, but I cannot shake off the idea that everywhere I go in Town I am being watched. I went shopping in Bond-street this morning, and every time I looked round there was a man . . . Oh, it was horrible!"

Bunny smothered an oath.

"By the time I had reached home again, I felt that it was intolerable. So I made plans and then caught the next train from Waterloo. Bunny," she added in an urgent whisper, "I want to help—let me!"

"Of course," he said, but it was merely to pacify her. "Unfortunately, however, there is still nothing to go on. I came down here myself because I imagined I was wasting my

time in London." But for the girl hearing him he would have groaned. Whilst it was wonderful to have her near him, yet if anything should break loose, if either Matthews or himself really got hold of something, her being on the spot would complicate the situation damnably. He couldn't have her running any unnecessary risk.

"You do give me your promise?" she urged.

In spite of his anxiety, he smiled at her.

"I promise to let you have your own way in everything which I consider is for your good," he compromised, and with that Susan had to be satisfied.

From somewhere close there came the strains of an orchestra.

"They're playing Popy's 'Enchantment'," she exclaimed; "there must be a dance! Shall we go?"

Bunny rose immediately. A number of other people were leaving the lounge. They followed the preceding couples up one flight of the imposing main staircase and into a cosy-looking ballroom. In the far corner a small orchestra started up a foxtrot.

"Bunny!"

There was no resisting the appeal. Susan with the resilience of youth had put away her suffering for the time being. Now she wanted to find forgetfulness. He was glad. All through dinner he had encouraged her to ignore

the subject which had brought so much gloom into her life. He had succeeded to such an extent that once she raised her wine-glass in mock homage.

“To Bunny Chipstead—dinner companion *par excellence*. You are not the only one, you see, who can pay compliments.”

He had acknowledged the tribute with a smile. Only the tightening of the fingers round the stem of his own glass gave any betrayal of the inward tumult.

Now she was eager for pleasure and excitement. Her lips were parted, her eyes shone. Bunny held out his hands and she glided into his arms.

The next few minutes took on the unreality of a dream. He could scarcely believe that he was living this scene. Couples passed and re-passed, but it seemed that Susan and he had the world to themselves—or was it a special world kept exclusive for their private use?

Anyhow, that dance was a pure delight. At the end Susan gave a little sigh of pleasure.

“You are really the most surprising person, Bunny,” she said; “why didn’t you ask me to dance when last I saw you?”

“Alas! I was only too conscious of my unworthiness.”

“Stuff! If you are stupid enough to say anything like that again I shall be truly

annoyed." The voice dropped. "Don't spoil my evening, old man!" she whispered.

The blood rushed to his head; his heart quickened its beat so rapidly that he became confused. That last appeal had almost carried him off his feet. This girl was totally unlike any other woman he had ever met. She combined the frank, clear-eyed, sportsmanlike qualities of the modern day with all the fragrant femininity for which the man of his type craved. It was the total lack of this essential quality which rendered her prototypes, in his eyes, so sickeningly unsexed. Chipstead had a horror of the flat-chested, unhipped, raucous-voiced cocktail-crazed creature that nowadays went by the name of girl, and, whenever encountered, he treated her with the frank unconcern she so frankly asked for and deserved. Young women were trying to make the best of two worlds and failing horribly in consequence. There was far too much of this aping men—in pursuits, mannerisms, even clothes. What appeal was there in these lank-limbed, convict-cropped oddities who lost the possible in endeavouring to gain the impossible?

They danced again. Susan was fairy-light for all the enchanting suppleness of her young figure. Radiant now as immaculate always, she lit up the large room with her distinctive beauty.

After the third encore, Bunny forced himself to say the conventional thing.

"I mustn't monopolise the most charming

girl in the room," he said ; " already three men are looking daggers."

" Does that mean that you don't want to dance with me any more ? "

He flicked her hand with his.

" Who's talking ' stuff ' now ? My dear, I ask nothing so much as to be able to spend the rest of my life dancing with you." His voice, for all the control he had over himself—and what a devil of a lot he required after those three dances—was vibrant with nervous intensity. Susan was bound to believe him, he felt.

She did.

" Because you said that so nicely we will dance again later on ; but now I feel I want some fresh air—it's rather fuggy here, don't you think ? How does a glimpse of the sea appeal ? "

" It appeals tremendously."

" We can walk down through the grounds."

" Splendid idea ! " Bunny spoke now with the excitement of a boy. Indeed, he had changed from a man into a boy. He looked forward to this stroll through the darkness with a zest that was almost discomfoting. He did not stop to reflect that he was behaving like a moon-struck youth, rushing his fences with a reckless and overweening impetuosity. The gods were being kind this night ; kinder than he had ever dreamed or had hoped to expect ; that was all he knew.

They left the room to a fusillade of comments.

"Bit rotten the old cove monopolising the prettiest girl I've seen in Bournemouth for an age," complained a surprisingly tenuous youth whose strength appeared to have run entirely to hair and pimples. "I was just going to risk it and ask her for a dance—and now she's popped off! I say," anxiously, "do you think that bloke was her father? If so, there may still be a chance."

"Bonehead!" came the acid reply from the girl by his side—one could tell she was a girl because she wore some sort of a frock—"that kid is with her MAN. Haven't you eyes? She's dopey on him—absolutely dopey!"

"O Lord!" exclaimed the tenuous youth, falling over one stilt of a leg; "but he's so frightfully *old*. It's perfectly ghastly!"

"Old? He's just right—about forty, I should imagine. I wish I had her chance—she's taking him into the garden to do the love-stuff."

"I say—let's dance," cut in the pimply youth.

"Go to Hell—you make me sick!" was the neat rejoinder.

It was true that Susan had taken her dancing partner into the cool quietude of the hotel gardens which stretched down to the East Cliff upper promenade. But her object had been merely to refresh herself with some decent

air—and to get away from the staring crowd. So she believed.

The night was soft and gracious. High in the dark velvet sky a glorious moon rode, beaming its benefaction. The sough of the sea was like a lullaby in the ear. How different this peace from the hectic excitement and nerve-strain of London! She was thankful she had come—oh, so thankful!

“Decent night!” said the man by her side.

“Wonderful! Look,” she pointed to the end of the grounds, “a summer-house! Do you think it will be damp?” Some spirit which she could not define was controlling her; she felt she wanted to leave the hotel far behind; she desired to be alone with this man whose clear-cut features showed resolute in the pale light of the moon.

“One can but try.” Slipping on the gravel-path, she touched his arm. He took her hand, and so they came to the rustic summer-house near the gate leading to the promenade. To both it was the simplest and yet most wonderful moment of their lives.

The door yielded and they entered.

“You mustn’t get cold,” said Bunny. His fingers put up the fur collar of her coat.

“Oh, I’m not cold.” As though to give him reassurance, her hand sought his again. The touch of the soft, warm flesh set his head spinning.



Control went by the board.

"Sweetest!" he whispered—and then a step, scrunching on the gravel, sounded outside.

There came a tap on the door.

"Yes?" Bunny stood in front of Susan, shielding her from view. His tone was almost savagely curt.

"Excuse me, sir," said a servant wearing the hotel uniform, "but a gentleman wishes to speak to you on the telephone. He says it's very important."

Back into the matter-of-fact, crime-ridden world he was thrust. It must be Matthews; he had said he might ring up that evening.

That meant he had some news.

"Very well—I will come."

The man turned and walked away.

"What is it?" Susan was by his side.

"Someone wants me on the 'phone; I expect it's Matthews."

"Matthews! That's the X2 man, isn't it? Oh, let's get back—he may have some news!"

The interlude was over.

CHIPSTEAD caught the unmistakable ring of excitement in the man's voice directly he spoke.

"This is Matthews. . . . Mr. Chipstead, I've found something at last."

"Where are you speaking from?"

"A village called Sandbanks, a few miles from Bournemouth, towards Poole. You can get here in twenty minutes with the car."

"Tell me the quickest route." When he had his instructions: "What is it you have found?"

The reply came dramatically:

"The Chief's hat. I'll be waiting for you at the sea-front."

"Right!" Chipstead snapped the reply and the receiver almost simultaneously and turned to meet Susan Courtenay's anxious gaze.

"Tell me!" she pleaded.

"Of course. Matthews was 'phoning from a place called Sandbanks, a few miles out. He says—promise you won't be affected too much?"

She bit her lip.

"Whatever it is, I will promise . . . now tell me."

"Matthews says he has found a hat which he believes belongs to——"

“Daddy! Then what does it mean? Does it mean that he is—dead?”

“Of course not!” He did his best to soothe her. “It means that at last we have something to work on. That is all.”

She shuddered.

“It sounds like one of those dreadful cases of drowning one reads about—something found on the bank. Take me with you—I shan’t be able to rest until I know something more. And I won’t be a fool—I’ve already promised you.”

They were standing by the entrance of the lounge by this time.

“What is that dreadful noise?” she asked, her nerves unstrung.

Bunny’s reply kept her silent.

“Hush! Just a minute! It’s the nine o’clock news coming through that loud-speaker.”

The metallic voice said: “Benjamin Farver, the patient who escaped from Bradmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, near Bournemouth, early this morning, has been recaptured by the police through the help of an A.A.C. scout.”

“What terrible things happen in the world!”

“Yes,” replied Chipstead. The reply was somewhat mechanical, for he was thinking of a man whose mouth was twisted on one side, and who had shot at him with intent to kill.

Was he Benjamin Farver?

Past the sea-entrance to the beautifully-kept

gardens, up Exeter-road, into the square of which Bournemouth is justly proud, and then into the main Poole Road, a death-trap at some hours, but now comparatively free of traffic, the car sped like a creature tortured by an uneasy conscience. Following the instructions from Matthews, Bunny turned off at County Gates, and quickly they were travelling through wooded country which, faintly illuminated by moonlight, looked picturesque and romantic. Ten minutes later the Austin swung round the corner at the end of a long hill. Before them was the sea. Here a man was waiting—Matthews.

During the short journey to the cottage which proved to be their destination, the X2 man told his story. All along, although he had kept the idea to himself, he had nursed the belief that the coast would furnish some clue to the mystery. To this end he had requested the local police for ten miles on either side of Bournemouth, to inform him should anything be found.

“If you will forgive me saying so, Miss Courtenay, it was the Chief’s body which I expected . . . but all we have is his hat.”

“Has it been in the sea?”

“That’s the strange thing about it,” he replied, turning to Chipstead, who had put the question: “I have examined the bowler—it was a bowler hat—but it certainly hadn’t been stained or damaged in any way by sea-water.”

“Why are you sure this is Sir Robert’s hat?”

“ Because the initials ‘ R.H. ’ are stamped on the inside band ; because it was a Scott hat—the Chief once told me he always bought Scott hats.”

“ All right,” said Chipstead ; “ where is the hat now ? ”

“ At the cottage which also serves for the local police-station—here we are.”

“ I wish the police hadn’t been dragged into this,” remarked Chipstead, as he helped the girl from the car.

“ I am sorry,” said Matthews ; “ but it was unavoidable. I couldn’t hope to cover twenty miles of coast-line without help.”

The speaker seemed aggrieved, and remembering the thankless job Matthews had had, Bunny relented.

“ Never mind—only the less the police are told the better. We don’t want this affair broadcasted.”

“ Of course not. Well, I’ll leave you to do the talking, Mr. Chipstead.”

The sergeant-in-charge listened respectfully to the story which Bunny told. As an essay in invention the narrative contained some merits.

“ You say that this unfortunate gentleman—Mr. Reginald Harris—your friend, to whom you say this hat belongs—is still missing ? ” the sergeant asked at the end.

“ Yes. As I have told you, he has been away from home for over a fortnight. We are afraid that his memory has gone. He had recently

had a very severe illness, and decided to come to Bournemouth, his favourite seaside resort because the air has always done him so much good."

"Where did he stay?"

"That I have not been able to ascertain," Chipstead felt obliged to lie. "As a matter of fact, we have had no trace of him since he left London. But we know that he intended to come to Bournemouth and so, naturally enough, we started to make our inquiries here."

The sergeant pulled at his thick moustache.

"Why didn't you send out a wireless message?" he asked.

"There were private reasons against that. We wished to avoid any possible publicity on that account."

"H'm. Well, you bein' a friend of the unfortunate gentleman should know best. Who is the young lady, may I ask?"

"She is Mr. Harris's sister." How many more lies would he be obliged to tell? He felt relief at having satisfied the questioner.

"Well, if you say this is your friend's hat, I suppose you had better have it. But, don't forget, you must return it to me as now it's become a police matter." The sergeant went to a cupboard and produced a very grimy-looking bowler. At the sight, Bunny felt Susan shiver. He touched her arm.

As they left the house, Bunny put the obvious question:

“ Who found the hat ? ”

“ A local fisherman named Morris. I am going to take you to him now.” Matthews looked at Susan. “ I wish you hadn’t come with Mr. Chipstead to-night, Miss Courtenay.”

“ Why ? ” quickly demanded the girl. She stood rigid, as though bracing herself to meet a shock.

“ Because if the story this man, Morris, tells is correct, I am afraid something pretty bad has happened to the Chief.”

Susan gave a low cry. The next moment, however, she had recovered sufficiently to say in a controlled voice : “ Whatever the news is, Mr. Matthews, I must hear it.” She turned to Chipstead as though expecting to receive his support.

But Bunny made no comment. She was surprised—and a trifle hurt—until she heard his exclamation of surprise.

“ What is it ? ” she asked.

Chipstead was bending down, examining by one of the car’s headlights a small piece of paper with torn edges.

“ I found this hidden beneath the band inside the hat,” he explained ; “ it’s queer——”

Without furnishing any further explanation, he passed the paper to the girl. Susan gasped as she looked at part of the word—

ULYSS——

it contained.

"You notice the paper's torn so that the word is cut in half," he said.

She saw the meaning immediately.

"The word is 'Ulysses,' Daddy's secret code word to you. He intended to write a message which you only would understand."

"Perhaps. Well," putting the scrap of paper carefully away in his pocket, "we'll go to see your fisherman, Matthews."

During the few minutes which elapsed before he stopped the car at Matthews' request outside a tumble-down looking building that looked more like a stable than a human habitation, Bunny looked sternly preoccupied.

"He is expecting us," Matthews said, opening the ramshackle gate at the bottom of the untidy patch of garden.

When he knocked, the door was opened by a man of middle-age dressed in corduroy trousers and a blue fisherman's jersey. The man was typical of his class with one curious exception; he wore extremely thick-lensed spectacles through which his pale-blue eyes appeared distorted. Perhaps it was his weak sight which caused him so frequently to blink.

"Good evenin', sir," was the acknowledgment he gave Matthews; "will 'e come in?"

"I've brought two friends, Morris. I want you to tell them what you told me earlier this evening."

"About findin' the hat, sir?"



“Yes—and exactly what you saw before finding the hat.”

The visitors were inside the untidy living-room of the cottage by this time. The accommodation was scanty, but Susan was given the one usable chair. Matthews and Chipstead stood.

“It was last night that it happened,” started Morris. “I was over at Studland—a deserted place at the best of times in the winter—when I noticed a number of men climbing down the cliff towards the sea. I couldn’t recognise any of them by sight, and I wondered what they was up to. I may as well tell you, gents,” the speaker continued, blinking furiously, “that there’s a powerful lot of smugglin’ goin’ on round these parts, and it’s honest fishermen wot gets the blame for it.”

“To come to the point, Morris, you were suspicious of what these men were doing and so you watched them. Is that so?”

“That’s right, sir.” The man’s lids blinked rapidly before he continued with his tale. Chipstead, who had put the question, lit a cigarette.

“Lately—that is since this ’ere smugglin’ ’as been goin’ on—there’ve been some funny fellers ’angin’ round, and so I thought it best to be careful. I’m half-blind, as you can see,” motioning to his face, “and I wasn’t fancying a bang on the ’ead—or worse, misters.”

“I don’t blame you.” Bunny blew a thin line of smoke.

“ So I got on me ’ands and knees and wriggled forward. I didn’t make much noise in the sand, and presently I was near enough to see wot they was up to. And wot do you think it was, sir ? ”

Excitement had caused the narrator’s voice to become shrill ; a wave of something sinister seemed to permeate the stifling air.

“ We are all anxious to know.”

The directness of the reply served to rattle the tale-teller for a moment. He beat his own previous record in blinking. Then :

“ There were three of ’em,” he said, “ and they were carryin’ something. At first I couldn’t make out wot it was. Then I thought it was a box, but after a while ”—he paused to take breath—“ I saw it was a body—the body of a man.”

Groping by his side, Bunny found Susan’s hand. Her fingers gripped his.

“ You are sure of that ? ”

“ I’m certain. It was just after nine and the new moon was at its best. I’m sure it was a man they were carryin’—he looked a goner, dead to me, but of course of that I couldn’t be sure.”

Still pressing Susan’s hand, Bunny looked the blinking narrator straight in the face.

“ Now one or two other questions, Morris. You will be well paid if you tell the truth.”

“ ‘ Tell the truth ! ’ ” The words appeared to anger the man. “ Wot’s the idea in suggestin’ that I’m tellin’ lies ? ”

“ I’m not suggesting anything of the sort. On the contrary, we are all very grateful to you for your information. Now what did the three men do with their burden? I suppose you stayed to watch? ”

“ I did that. At first I thought of takin’ a ’and. But what could one man—and half blind at that—do against three? Then I hoped that p’raps someone else would come along.”

“ And no one did? ”

“ Not a soul. It’s main lonely jes’ about there at night, ’specially at this time of the year. But you were askin’ me wot they did. Well, they took the body down to the water where they had a skiff waitin’.”

“ And then what happened? ”

“ The last I saw of ’em was rowin’ out to a biggish motor-boat that was standin’ by. Directly they was all aboard they started up the engine.”

“ And after they had gone you found this hat—is that so? ”

“ That’s quite correct, sir.”

“ But when you took the hat to the police, Morris, you just said you had discovered it on the beach? ”

“ That’s right, sir.”

“ Why didn’t you inform them of what you saw? ”

The fisherman blinked.

“ That’s a fair question, and I’ll answer it

sir. The truth is that police-sergeant and me ain't on the best of terms. There's some round 'ere who don't think I'm quite right in the 'ead—and that fellow's one of 'em. 'Simple Sammy' they call me. I wasn't goin' there to be laughed at—tellin' about findin' the hat was one thing, but if I 'ad said anythin' else, they'd 'ave thought I was makin' it up; they wouldn't 'ave believed me, anyway."

"You say you weren't able to recognise any of the men?"

"No, sir. They was all strangers to me."

"And the time was about nine o'clock?"

"As near nine o'clock as makes no difference, sir."

"Thank you, Morris. Here's something for your trouble."

The fisherman blinked as he extended a hand for the money, blinked again as he expectorated on it for luck, and blinked once more when the door of his humble abode closed after his three visitors.

Once he was sure he was alone, he straightened himself and laughed.

Not many miles away Sir Robert Heddingly was facing once more the man who was keeping him a prisoner. The Chief of X2 was now upon his feet and fully dressed.

"I am delighted to see how complete your recovery has been, my dear Sir Robert," said

the voice behind the mask. "You appear, I am pleased to notice, to have regained your strength entirely."

Heddingly did not reply. The tactics of his captors had changed during the last couple of days, and he was curious to learn what it meant. He had been given proper food, with the result that he was able to dress and move about the room. He was still far too weak to be able to put up any physical fight, or even resistance, but he felt that something of his manhood had been restored.

"You do not answer," mocked the masked man; "haven't you any questions you would like to put to me?"

"Plenty—but I won't waste my breath asking them. I'll just say this, however: you realise, I suppose, that this farcical comedy must come to an end sooner or later? I admit I do not know exactly where this house is, but the chances are that it is not a great distance from London. It will be discovered before long, and when it is—what then, my friend?"

The other laughed.

"You are really a very trusting person, my dear Sir Robert. In the present case, for instance, you appear to be placing far more faith in the men of your Department than the facts would warrant. You have been in my care now for nearly a week—has anything happened to give you any reasonable hope that you may be rescued? Have any notes of

reassurance, for instance, been dropped through the window?"

The prisoner yawned.

"Honestly, you are not a bit funny," he said. "If you can't say anything brighter than that, I wish you would leave me alone."

A further low laugh acknowledged the criticism.

"That is unfortunately what I am obliged to do for the next few days. But you will be left in good hands. Voost will be watching over you with loving care. By the way, he had to shoot one of your particular friends this afternoon. Annoying, but necessary."

If he had meant to goad, he succeeded. The prisoner rose from the chair. But his new-found strength was not equal to the sudden demand upon it, and he had to stop half-way, his left hand gripping the bed-rail for support.

Meanwhile, The Disguiser walked to the door, passed through, and locked it behind him.

It took Sir Robert Heddingly some time to recover from even this slight exertion; and even when his heart was beating normally, the sense of shock was still prostrating. What had the fellow meant? Who was the "particular friend"? Could it possibly have been Bunny Chipstead? And "shot"? Did that mean killed or merely wounded? The next time the monstrosity Voost came into the room with

food, he would catch him by the throat and force the truth out of him. He would make him write out a confession . . .

But he would want strength for that—strength, a cool head and strategy. It was useless to get worked up into a fresh frenzy.

He commenced to walk up and down the room. He had to go slowly, but the movement tended to ease his mind. Once, as he turned, he had the conviction that he was being watched. This idea had become forced upon his mind during the last two days. At periods he had heard a faint clicking sound come from the wall farthest away from the bed. It was a noise that might have been caused by the discreet closing of a spy-hole. Three times he had endeavoured to discover such a peeping-place, but he had not been successful. It might be an illusion, but the idea remained nevertheless.

### CHAPTER XIII

### ON THE PARIS TRAIN

**T**HE Calais-Mediterranean express was hurtling through Amiens, rocking like a motor-car driven by a drunken man. Making his way with difficulty towards the

restaurant-car, Bunny Chipstead swore not too mild an oath as a man carrying almost twice his weight, lurched against him turning a corner. The French were an admirable nation in many ways, but he did wish they would prevent their trains resembling small boats in big gales.

"Say," said an American voice, "I'm sorry!"

"Quite all right," reassured Bunny, who felt that if any spare breath returned to him during the next few hours he would be fortunate.

"They don't leave much spare room for fellows of my size in these corridors," continued the over-weight bumper.

"They don't indeed," Bunny managed to answer, and then, partly because standing about was the very best method to invite fresh disaster, but principally because he was hungry after the Channel crossing, he staggered onwards.

It was whilst he was doing his best to adapt his locomotion to the giddy gyrations of the P.L.M. that he suddenly stopped. It was impossible to avoid looking into the carriages, and in one of these . . .

Bunny wheeled, with disastrous results. He fell against the brass bar protecting the window of the corridor, and saw with dismay a long line of prospective diners. One and all bore the expression of determined food seekers. To return to make the investigation he wanted



was impossible. He did the sensible thing, wedging himself in line with the rest.

He reached the dining-car spent and ruffled. The engine-driver had either gone mad, or had left intense domestic trouble behind him at Calais. The train continued to rock as though some malignant sprite was controlling the levers. All past records went by the board. To eat decently was impossible; it was a case of taking both hands to it, and letting the world think what it would. As a matter of fact, the world was in no better case, of course, so there wasn't any need to have bothered. Still, it was aggravating to lose more than half one's soup . . .

Bunny, although hungry, had several other problems besides the momentary one of conveying food to the face without disaster. On this journey to the restaurant in search of a catch-as-catch-can dinner, some chord of memory had been struck in his brain. As he had passed one of the *wagon-lits*, he noticed a man looking at him intently. It may have been his imagination, but he fancied that directly this man caught his eye, he hurriedly raised the newspaper before his face.

It had happened in a fraction of time, of course, and Bunny had walked—or rather stumbled—on for half a dozen yards or so before the resolution came to turn back, and endeavour to get a closer view of the retiring newspaper reader. He had wheeled, as stated.

Then had come the collision with the long line of food seekers.

As he caught a flying fragment of fish, Bunny resorted to a little further bad language. He felt like the gentleman in the story who had returned to earth in an unwanted reincarnation, only to discover that he had lost all his money in a non-existent gold mine, and that his present father's name was Mudd.

Bunny, in point of fact, was very fed up indeed. Since his return from the States, events had conspired to knock whatever conceit he may once have been induced to possess very effectively out of him. Stripped down to the bone, the present position was that a heart-broken girl had relied on him to find her father—and he had failed. The knowledge was humiliating.

Bunny was not being fair to himself, of course—but what man in that state of mind ever is? All that he was conscious of at the present time was that he had been forced to go round and round in a circle of bewilderment, and that there was no gleam of light anywhere. Only one fact was reasonably clear in the disappearance of Sir Robert Heddingly, and that was that the elusive criminal who elected to be known as The Disguiser was responsible. But where was The Disguiser? And even if this crook could be found, where was Heddingly?

The story which the blink-eyed fisherman

had told him the previous night at Sandbanks, may or may not have been true. There were elements about this yarn which were anything but satisfying to Bunny's trained brain. This narrative may have been born in the same facile mind that conceived the finding of the hat. Both, in other words, may have been a "plant."

As regards the hat, this certainly had belonged to Bob Heddingly at one time or another, but—Bunny frowned at his glass of wine before lifting it carefully—he would not be ready to swear that the first portion of the word "Ulysses" had been written by his old friend.

But if—and here he set down his glass again—Bob had not scrawled that fragment of a word, there was only one conclusion: it meant that the other side had possession of a secret, which he had believed no one else knew outside of Heddingly and himself. Except Susan, of course.

He left that for a moment, and returned to the man who had hidden his face with a newspaper back behind in the *wagon-lits* section. A moment before this man had been scrutinising him closely—naturally a quick observer, he could have sworn to that—and then, directly he had realised his action was observed, he had endeavoured to screen his face.

What was his object? Was it merely confusion at being caught out in an act of

unconscious rudeness? Or was it because he feared that he would be recognised?

Bunny concentrated. The man's figure had inclined to bulkiness . . . Then he clenched his fingers. *Pearson!* The fellow with the curiously-shaped ears, who had slipped away at the Wendover Grill.

He was sure of it! The shy individual on the train was the bogus wholesale chemist, who had called on him in London with that obviously lying story.

Pearson had been after the package which the murdered man had left in his keeping—the package (and here Bunny's hand crept up to the inside breast-pocket of his coat) which he had fetched from the bank that morning, and was now carrying on his person.

It may have been a stupid thing to do, but that package, or rather the secret it contained, irritated him. It was like a mustard-plaster on a raw wound. The chances were that once the code could be deciphered, some clue—some very valuable clue—might be obtained bearing on the present affair. In any case it would tell something of *The Disguiser*—something which that crook was so anxious to keep secret, that he had ordered the prospective betrayer to be slain. To allow such a possible avenue to remain idle any longer in the strong-room of a bank was impossible. In Paris he would seek the help of his old friend, Cuvilier of the Counter-Espionage Service. Until then

he must see that nothing happened to the package.

Why was "Pearson" on the train? His having engaged a *wagon-lit* pointed to the fact that he was on his way to the Riviera. The South of France season for crooks had not commenced yet, but, of course, that did not signify a great deal. He could be leaving it at Marseilles, always a profitable city for men of his class, or there were possibilities also at Dijon or Lyons, at both of which places the express stopped.

He himself was getting off at Paris. A private as well as a business reason called him to the French capital. That morning he had received an urgent telegram. His sister, whom he had neglected to see, as originally arranged, on his return from New York, was ill; she wished imperatively to see him. It was a command which he could not disregard.

He was surrounded by illness, it seemed. That morning Susan Courtenay had sent down a message to the effect that she had a cold, and would breakfast in her own room.

He quickly wrote a note of condolence and sympathy, and added that he was afraid he would have to be leaving for Paris that day, as his sister had sent him an urgent appeal. Whilst he was there he would endeavour to see if there was any "end" to the mystery which he might profitably follow. She must take great care of herself whilst he was gone.

Matthews would be staying on in the district, and if she became suspicious of anything or anyone she was to communicate with the X2 man at once. Bunny had added that he would be staying in Paris at his flat, and he gave the address in the street off the Champs Elysées. Having sent the note upstairs, he settled to his breakfast.

In one respect he was not sorry that Susan was slightly indisposed. Had she been well, she would have endeavoured to accompany him across the Channel. With the work he had set himself to do if the signs were propitious, he would have much greater difficulty ensuring her safety in Paris. Of course, she could have stayed with his sister—yet, on the whole, it was better that he should be going alone.

Matthews had called after breakfast.

“Anything fresh, sir?” he asked.

“I have decided to cross to Paris to-day, Matthews. For one thing, if there is anything in that fisherman’s theory that the body was taken to France, I shall be better able to deal with it there, and for another I have to see my sister.”

“What about taking me along with you, Mr. Chipstead?”

Bunny shook his head.

“Afraid not, Matthews. I’m not so sure that the real core of this business is not quite near at hand if we could only find it. That fact must not be overlooked. A moment’s

pause and the speaker had continued: "You must not mention anything about this to Miss Courtenay, but I had a rather peculiar experience yesterday afternoon. It was in the New Forest. After leaving you, I went for a long drive and got lost."

Matthews started twirling the brim of his hat round.

"Don't be afraid that you won't be getting interested. I'll promise you will very soon. Coming back I nearly got killed. . . . Wait a minute and I'll show you something."

Directly he saw the round hole in the negligé felt hat which Chipstead handed him, Matthews became alert. The other had carried out his promise to make him interested.

"Made by a revolver bullet," he commented; "who did it?"

"That is what I should like you to discover. Sit down, and I'll tell you what happened."

The story ended, Matthews nodded.

"What you want to know is whether that lunatic who was recaptured last night according to the wireless Second News Bulletin, is the same fellow as the man with the twisted mouth who gibbered when you asked him the way. Isn't that it?"

"That is exactly it," Chipstead corroborated; "if he isn't the same man, then it will be your job to find out who he actually is, and all about him. I agree that that," pointing to the hole in the felt hat, "was caused by a bullet from a

revolver, and if that revolver was fired by the gibbering gentleman, then—well, there's quite an interesting line of country for you to investigate, Matthews."

The man's face brightened.

"By Jove, yes," he agreed.

Ten minutes later, just as Bunny was leaving for the station, after sending off a wire to his sister to say he would be arriving at the Gare du Nord by the ten o'clock train that night, he heard his name called. It was Susan, looking tired and dispirited.

"So you are going to Paris, Bunny?"

"I am afraid I must, dear . . . my sister

"Oh, I quite understand . . . I just felt I had to wish you good-bye—that was all."

"Directly I have any news I will let you know, of course. You will be staying on here?"

"Yes. As you know, I have developed a positive hatred of London. You will take care of yourself, Bunny?" she added quickly.

Before he could reply, she had turned away. He would have rushed to her, but that a woman had immediately engaged her in some footling conversation. As he got into the taxi he frowned. Was Susan annoyed because he had not offered to take her with him to Paris? Women, even the best of them, were so difficult to understand, especially when they had their queer moods on them.



He glanced at his watch. If he were to catch the fast London train there was no more time to be lost. As he closed the taxi door behind him, he looked at Susan, but her back was still turned.

This memory was very vivid as he sipped his coffee and lit a cigarette. For the moment he ignored the man in the *wagon-lit*. Unless "Pearson" risked his neck—and almost certainly broke it—by jumping off an express travelling at over fifty miles an hour, he would not be able to leave the train before Paris.

He wondered what Susan was doing now. Reading? Playing bridge? Dancing? He moved his shoulders as though trying to shake off an invisible weight. He hated the thought of her dancing. Only twenty-four hours before . . . And that morning they had parted as though those golden moments possessed no significance.

He felt fury taking possession of him. He was rubbed on the raw. He told himself that the girl's attitude was illogical and ungracious—and then the next moment he felt an utter cad for allowing such thoughts to enter his mind. Being in love was a very difficult state, he discovered, and while this black mood was on him, he wished himself free of the fever.

Across the narrow gangway which ran down the centre of the dining-car, a couple were

talking so loudly that he could not help overhearing.

"Yes, the golf isn't at all bad at Cagnes . . . I think you will enjoy it, old thing."

"I'm sure I shall," replied the girl who was the speaker's companion.

Cagnes. Where he had dreamed one day of taking Susan . . .

In his present frame of mind he did not want to overhear any more. Signalling the waiter, he paid his bill and started back on the long trek to his carriage.

Presently, after many bumps, he arrived at the *wagon-lit* containing his "pigeon." The occupant was no longer reading: he had stretched himself out on the seat, drawn a travelling-rug over his face, and was apparently asleep.

If the man was proceeding to the Riviera, it was curious he should fall asleep before the attendant came to prepare the carriage for the night. Bunny was not positive as yet that the slumberer was "Pearson," but the drawn-up rug, obscuring the whole of the man's face, was a promising sign.

He was tempted to enter the carriage and make certain. But the other was obviously already on his guard; he might lodge a charge of assault or even of attempted theft. In that case there would be a devil of a row and nothing could be gained. It would be much better to wait until Paris was reached. Should the man get off

there, he would have him shadowed. If "Pearson" remained on the train there was nothing else for it but to let him go. He himself could not continue the journey.

With an ear-piercing shriek and a deafening grinding of brakes the train drew up at the big terminus.

"Bunny!"

Chipstead stared. Just beneath his window stood a handsomely-attired woman of early middle-age. Norah! The sister who had sent that message to the effect that she was so ill that he must come to her immediately!

Her unexpected appearance was a confounded nuisance. Now he might not be able to complete his plans. He had taken the precaution of placing himself outside the *wagon-lit* containing the suspect, and intended to remain on guard until Cuvilier, to whom he had wired from London, showed up. Cuvilier could safely be depended upon to discover where "Pearson" went to earth if he left the train.

But now everything became muddled. There was no sign of Cuvilier; his sister had climbed up into the corridor, intent on one of those public embraces for which she had long been famous, and behind came a crush of porters carrying hand luggage of all styles, sizes and descriptions. The porters buffeted him with a medley of shrill cries and garlic-flavoured imprecations. He became the centre of a wildly-

surging mass. For several seconds there was some doubt of his remaining intact, and when the tumult somewhat ceased, he gave an exclamation that caused his sister to hold up a gloved finger in reproof.

“Remember my tender years, old man!” she said.

Bunny took another look behind him. There was no disbelieving his eyes: the *wagon-lit* was empty. “Pearson” had gone—vanished by some strange means through the closely-packed throng that had a few seconds before seethed in the corridor. The manoeuvre must have required strength, patience and several other virtues. But the man had accomplished it.

“Have you lost your luggage or your senses, Bunny?”

This time Norah’s tone was lacking its former humour. In common with almost every right-minded woman who has gone to meet a much-beloved brother, she demanded attention. Instead of which he was behaving as though she was non-existent; why, he had not even addressed a word to her yet.

Bunny came to himself at the touch of the gloved hand on his sleeve.

“Sorry, Norah—awfully glad to see you, of course—but, well the fact is, I’m worried. Tell you about it later. In the meantime, let’s get away from here.” Something must have happened to Cuvilier; otherwise he would surely

have been there ; and if he did show up now, nothing could be done.

One of the highest compliments the late Hector Dawbarn had ever paid his wife was to the effect that "Norah was so tactful." She exercised that inestimable quality of tact now ; although questions were bursting like so many bombs inside her brain, she refrained until they were seated side by side in that chariot of destruction and sudden death whose other name is a Paris taxi-cab.

As the driver took a corner light-heartedly on the rims of two wheels, climbed a crowded pavement out of sheer nonchalance and sped on with Death grinning at him every yard of the way, she just asked : " And what was it worrying you, Bunny ? Tell your little sister ! " It was one of Norah's pleasant foibles to refer to herself as being " wee " or some other appellation of diminutiveness whereas she was actually an upstanding person of at least five feet seven inches and weighing nearly ten stone.

" A very old friend has disappeared, Norah," he answered.

She seized on the explanation.

" So that is the reason why you have neglected me ; some more of this wretched criminal business, I suppose ? When will you begin to settle down, Bunny ? "

" And when will you begin to treat the truth with a certain amount of respect ? " he countered ;

“ what do you mean, you abandoned woman, by saying you were seriously ill when all the time you were absolutely fit ? ”

His sister laughed.

“ Feminine strategy, dear brother ; that is all. Absorbed as you were, I knew I had no chance of getting you to Paris by honest means so I chose dishonest ones. And now,” getting closer, “ tell me all about her.”

Bunny, while he stared dumbstruck at the questioner, was conscious of a rising tide staining his cheeks, and making him feel a fool.

“ What on earth are you gabbling about ? ” he demanded blusteringly.

His sister laughed. She had guessed correctly at the truth.

#### CHAPTER XIV

#### LOVE THINKS OF TREACHERY

**A**S a certain learned but savage philosopher has phrased it : “ To be in love is to be in Hell ! ”

The morning that Bunny Chipstead left for London *en route* to Paris, was one of the most miserable within Susan Courtenay’s recollection. Love—and she did not deny that she loved this man very much indeed ; so much, in fact, that

the thought of future existence without him was almost impossible—is apt to induce queerly dangerous moods. For instance, this was one of the questions which Susan, sitting beneath the pines on the beautiful Bournemouth West Cliff, debated: Had Bunny Chipstead used that supposed urgent message from his sister merely as an excuse? If another girl had put the query Susan most certainly would have used a harsh term to her for being such a fool.

But this was not anything to do with another girl; it concerned only herself. And it concerned her vitally.

There were little white horses riding on the sea this morning. Overhead the sun was giving its 11.30 peep upon the world. There was a delightful tang in the air; her immediate world was without a flaw; for the moment she had forgotten her anxiety concerning her father—and yet she frowned.

Were some men cads enough to kiss and run away? Not that Bunny Chipstead had kissed her—but if the hotel servant had not come to that summer-house last night she was sure he would have done so. And—a deep flush dyed her cheeks—she would have been glad. She repeated the word beneath her breath: *GLAD!* She would have been glad! What a man for any girl to have for a lover! But—had he run away?

She knew she ought to be ashamed of herself,

but she had a morbid delight in dwelling on this possible treachery. Carried away by the dancing—for a man who danced so little, he was surprisingly good—the night, her attitude—oh, yes, she had led him on, she did not deny it—had he lost his head only to repent his rashness the following morning? Ridiculous, almost incredible as this may have appeared to anyone else, the idea became more and more rooted in Susan's mind.

She gathered the evidence for the prosecution, and, with a fresh frown, found it overwhelming. To begin with, Bunny was forty. He was old enough to be her . . . old enough, at any rate, to be permanently fixed in his ways of life. What was it old Lady Daventry—and if *she* didn't know men and their ways, having had four husbands and nine sons, who should?—had once told her? "If a man hasn't married by the time he is forty he seldom makes a fool of himself in that way."

The small hand tightened on the arm of the seat.

Was it that? Was he afraid of making a fool of himself? Had he been afraid of losing his much-cherished bachelorhood? Had he thought her a forward young minx, whom he would have liked to slap? Perhaps, this being so, it was better that he had not kissed her. She had not that memory to rise up and haunt her. If his lips had once been pressed to hers, she could never have forgotten . . . never. . . .



Faith came tardily to do battle with Love's treachery. Bunny had given her his reason for going to Paris. In fact, he had two reasons—and one of them concerned her. He went not only to see his sister who was ill—*ill, you fool*, she repeated angrily to herself—but to follow up a possible trail of her father's. What a fool she was—what a fool! If feeling horrible about the finest man in the world,—*her* man, although he hadn't kissed her yet, and had only said "Sweetest" in that thrilling voice of his—meant anything, then she almost wished she was not in love. Almost, but not quite. For if she weren't in love, what on earth would she have to live for now that her father was gone?

"Good morning, Miss Courtenay."

Looking up, startled, she saw Matthews, the man from X2, standing over her.

"Good morning, Mr. Matthews, I didn't see you."

"You seemed too busy with your thoughts, Miss Courtenay. Do you intend to stay on in Bournemouth?"

"As far as I know at present. Why do you ask?"

"Because Mr. Chipstead has left you in my charge and under my care until he returns from Paris. As I have an important investigation to carry out immediately, I want you, please, to promise that you will be very careful as regards where you go and to whom you speak."

“Is it necessary for you to say that, Mr. Matthews?”

He maintained his ground.

“In my opinion it is, Miss Courtenay; and that is also the view of Mr. Chipstead.”

“Do you think, then, that I am likely to be kidnapped or something?”

“It is well to be on the safe side. May I see you back to your hotel now, Miss Courtenay?—I am going that way.”

This was too much. She objected to being treated like a child.

“Certainly not!” she replied; “I am perfectly well able to take care of myself, Mr. Matthews.”

The X2 man shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He was plainly perturbed.

“I apologise if I was in danger of becoming a nuisance to you.” He seemed about to add something else, but then, with a stiff, awkward inclination of the head, turned and walked away.

As she watched his figure recede, Susan felt penitent. She had been a pig to him and ought to be ashamed of herself. Well, she was. But everything was wrong this morning; the world seemed awry. Up till now she had been able generally to whistle Fate to her heel, but now she had become the sport of circumstance. What she wanted was some exercise; she started off in the opposite direction at a brisk pace.

IT took Bunny fully forty-eight hours to do the dutiful. During that time he worked like a beaver. The things which Norah alleged Ross Smith, the London lawyer, had left undone, he put right. The stockbroker Tellou, concerning whose behaviour certain grave suspicions had arisen, proved to be not so much a rascal as a grossly incompetent person. Indolence was the man's middle name. Having addressed a rebuke which for terse efficiency might have been accepted as a model for all similar occasions, he transferred every bond and share to his own London broker, and then commenced to take a few more easy breaths. Until then, even allowing for Norah's natural gift for exaggeration, he was in a cold sweat for fear that the very comfortable competence which Hector Dawbarn, so well-known as a former Paris-American, had left his sister, had gone down the spout.

After this straightening-up of the business end, he submitted to being escorted to various social gatherings, at all of which he was excessively bored. Norah Dawbarn's principal pre-occupation seemed to be the recital of the many excellent qualities which her one and only brother possessed. The inclined-to-be-suspicious Bunny quickly awoke to this fact with a feeling of unmitigated horror. Charming as Norah

was, he could have cursed her. He hated these useless women who gushed over him and pressed him—in between doing the lounge-lizard act of handing cakes or fetching cushions—to dilate upon his “perfectly marvellous adventures.” Adventures! What did these vacuous-minded, lip-sticked dolls know of the worry he had at the present time, for instance?

He longed to get clear of these over-heated, over-scented rooms, luxurious to the final degree, which the owners used as picturesque settings for the beguilement of such males as happened along. In the intervals of talking to a prospective divorcée from Seattle, whose millions had snared but could not hold an Austrian Count, he recalled the clear eyes and untouched lips of Susan Courtenay. The thought of her was like a cooling, refreshing wind.

“What a ghastly crowd!” he complained on the afternoon of the second day; “where on earth did you pick them up?”

His sister took his arm.

“You seem to forget, Bunny, that I am fortunate in having the very *elite* of the foreign colony for my friends.” Her tone was more than defence; it was practically a rebuke.

“Well, all I hope is that I shan’t have to meet them any more; you ought to find something useful to do, Norah, instead of wasting your time fooling round with these nonentities.”

“That is severe!” She made a *moue*. “You

do not seem your usual self, my dear ; hasn't the love affair in London progressed satisfactorily ? ”

As he did not wish to enter into any discussion of Susan Courtenay whilst his sister was in her present flippant mood, he endeavoured to change the subject.

“ Where do you intend to dine to-night ? ”

“ If you were not so abstracted, I would suggest the Château de Meurice, but what is the use in taking you to one of the smartest restaurants in Paris if you persist in behaving like a bear ? ”

Because he felt there was an element of truth in the accusation, he professed penitence.

“ Sorry, Norah, but as I told you when I arrived, I'm worried. My best friend—oh, it's a man and an elderly one at that—has mysteriously vanished without leaving a trace behind him. This man has a very powerful enemy and I am beginning to think that——”

“ You think that your friend has been murdered ? ”

“ That he is dead—or something worse.”

The car had stopped in a traffic block in the Place Vendome. Norah Dawbarn gripped her brother's arm again.

“ Bunny, dear,” she said, “ why will you go on risking your life in this way ? Oh, I don't mean that you should give up looking for your friend, but—but what is the sense of a man who has money, position, everything really that the

world can offer, playing fast and loose with the worst kinds of danger as you have done practically ever since the war? Why don't you be sensible now and settle down?"

He flung the stub of the cigarette he had been smoking out of the window.

"I'm not so sure I shan't take your advice, Norah—but I have to find my pal first."

"Do you expect to find him in Paris?"

He replied wearily: "I don't know . . . perhaps . . . perhaps not. Usually in cases like this something turns up, but so far I've drawn a blank." This was true; reports had arrived from agents in St. Malo, Havre, Calais and other ports along the French coast, but none had been satisfactory. More and more he was coming to the conclusion that the tale the fisherman of Sandbanks had told him was a clever concoction.

"But I do not intend to bore you with my troubles, Norah," he went on. "Why such reckless extravagance as the Château de Meurice? Do you want to ruin me?"

"If the girl you haven't been nice enough yet to tell me about, was with you, the Château—as we now call it for short to prevent mixing it up with the Hotel Meurice—would certainly be one of the places where you would take her to dine. So why draw the line at your sister?"

"Oh, all right, old girl. I'll telephone for a table."

Fashion makes strange decrees—and often delights in turning those it has made topsyturvy. For instance, the latest fashionable restaurant to the Parisian—native and imported—was situated in the Bois. In the ordinary way such a locality would be ultra-smart in the summer season but “dead” in the autumn. One turn of Fashion’s whirligig, however, and the manner was reversed; so many leaders of the *haute monde* (and the glittering questionables who invariably accompany it these days) had given their personal *cachet* to the journey out from the crowded boulevards. They said—or, at least, Georges Copin, who had something of a poet’s reputation, said—that “the deep-bosomed, brooding serenity of the Bois” brought peace and a more adequate digestion. Everyone laughed; no one understood what this precious nonsense meant—but the word went forth.

Consequently it was necessary to book a table. And even though Bunny telephoned early, he would not have been successful had he not prevaricated by saying that a very important man indeed in the eyes of Paris was to be a member of his party that night.

“Fouquières!” repeated Norah; “I seem to remember the name—now who is he?”

Her brother evaded a direct answer.

“He has—well, something to do with the police—at least, a section of the police.”

“ And do you intend to ask this—this policeman to dine with us ? ”

Bunny gave reassurance by patting an admirable shoulder.

“ Oh, no—I am going along to see Paul Fouquières after you are safely in bed to-night. I merely used his name as a lever.”

She returned to her former attack.

“ Which meant you intend to thrust yourself into a further adventure, I suppose? What you need, Bunny, is some stronger influence than I can give you. As I have said, it is time—high time—you settled down. There is only one way in which a man like you can settle down satisfactorily and that is for him to get married.”

“ Really ? ”

“ My belief, although you are as close as an oyster about it, is that this mysterious girl you have left behind in London, and about whom I have heard whispers——”

“ Only good whispers, Norah.”

“ I grant you only good whispers, is merely leading you on. In that event I know several very suitable girls here in Paris——”

“ Well, if you do, keep them away from me,” was the ungracious reply ; “ and now I’m popping off to dress.” He kissed her and departed.

For some time after he had left the room, Norah remained staring into the wood fire. Although American-born, she disliked steam-



heat and only used it when the weather made it essential.

Bunny had changed; there was no doubt about that. And it could not be the disappearance of this friend which was the cause—at least, not the whole cause. He had not denied there was a girl. Bunny with a girl! It seemed so strange.

Although she had not seen her, and, in spite of her declarations, had received only the barest hint from a friend in London, part of which ran:—

“Your darling brother with the ridiculous name has evidently fallen at last from his proud estate. He could have been seen looking oh! so longingly into the face of an exceedingly pretty girl—but *years younger*, my dear!—at Waterloo-station the other day . . .”—

her hopes had begun to revive. If only Bunny would marry! She had given him up as a hopeless bachelor for years, but now perhaps . . . And if the girl was really nice, surely she would have the necessary influence to keep him away from the dangers he dabbled in. Why was it men—some men—delighted in wandering off the beaten tracks, leaving the well-lighted ways of Life for dark, noisome alleys? Why was it that a person of intelligence like her brother should always be wanting to risk his life for some impossible

reason, should welcome the chance to endure all kinds of ridiculous hardships when normally he could live such an existence of sheltered ease? Men were very strange.

Norah sighed. Really, everything seemed to depend on this unknown girl.

#### CHAPTER XVI AT THE CHATEAU DE MEURICE

THE name of Paul Fouquières had proved magical. The *maître d'hôtel* had bowed elaborately before piloting them in person to the much-prized table in the corner.

It might have been a gala night in the season, so crowded was the spacious dining-room. Years before this château had been the Paris home of a nobleman famous throughout France; and, although he might have shifted one way in his grave at the thought of his demesne having been turned into a restaurant, yet when he heard the names of some of those who frequented it, he most assuredly would have rolled back, reassured, into his former position.

But, as is the custom these days, the half-world commingled with the nobility. The scene

was so animated as to be almost hectic, although dancing had not yet commenced. To the unsophisticated the sight would have been one of pure enchantment. Some of the richest and best-known men in the world were present ; many, too, of the loveliest living women, some wearing jewels that would have ransomed a syndicate of kings in an age when royalties were more fashionable. Radiant faces showed above amazingly beautiful shoulders, fully revealed by *décolleté*, daringly modern. The eye was ravished, the mind enthralled by the spectacle.

" You must banish melancholy here, Bunny ; I defy you to be miserable," said Norah, looking round with sparkling eyes. Hector Dawbarn in his lifetime had been more fond of going by himself to the Ritz cocktail bar than of accompanying his wife to social functions, but since his death Norah had revelled in freedom. To-night she was in her element.

" Who said I was miserable ? " her brother answered. His eyes travelled over the dazzlingly illuminated room, and the thought came : What a haul here for a master-crook ! If all the jewels these women displayed so frankly were real, a fabulous fortune was awaiting the man who was daring enough to plan and effect a hold-up. And how tempting : this place was away from Paris, surrounded by what amounted to country . . .

" Aren't you going to order, Bunny ? "

Norah's voice broke in upon his meditations: "Really, I cannot compliment myself upon my host."

He apologised and signalled. The *maitre d'hôtel*, supervising a hundred tasks, was not too busy to come to that corner table, and to spare five valuable minutes in conference.

"And Monsieur Fouquières?" he inquired, when the question of the wine had been finally settled.

"He must have been detained," said Chipstead; "you know how busy a man he is."

The other made an expressive gesture.

"There is much in Paris to occupy M. Fouquières—that is well known."

"I will reserve this chair in case he should come later."

"Certainly; M'sieur."

"You would have made a good diplomat if you had not gone in for your horrible detective work, Bunny."

"Why?"

"Because you have the gift of lying without betraying the fact. You know very well M. Fouquières will not come here to-night; you have not even invited him."

Her brother's features slipped into what she had got into the habit of calling "that aggravatingly mysterious grin."

"Fouquières is the type who is most likely to drop into any place where he has not received an invitation," he replied.

Norah picked up her soup-spoon.

"I'm far too hungry to attempt to grapple with your ridiculous mysteries," she said.

Bunny had his own thoughts, and one particular train was rather startling. Some intuitive prompting was telling him that he ought not to have brought his sister to the Château de Meurice that night. His instinct might be wrong, of course; and, in any case, it would be a hopeless task to try to persuade Norah to go home. Nothing short of an earthquake could do that.

Norah was obviously enjoying herself. She was like a girl let out of school. She responded to her exotic surroundings as a flower responds to the sun. Even the super-excellence of the *cuisine* could not detract her attention from the company, new members of which crowded in now that dancing had commenced.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered ecstatically, "there's Mrs. Henry Niville."

The mention of this name was sufficient to cause Bunny to look up. Mrs. Henry Niville was a world-celebrity. Her specialities were husbands and jewels; she collected both impartially, and with a whole-hearted zest which from time to time gave her front-page positions in the world's press.

Wearing so many diamonds that Bunny felt like putting a hand before his eyes, she now swept in, insolent in her superb carriage and indifference to the world's criticism.

“ You see who she’s with ? ” said Norah, in another gusty whisper ; “ the Comte Guy de Saigné ! ” The august name was breathed with appropriate respect.

“ Don’t forget the bodyguard,” responded Bunny ; “ you should know that the lady never appears in public without her court.”

It was certainly a remarkable entry. Behind Mrs. Niville and her escort—one of the richest noblemen of all France—streamed six young men. These constituted the “ bodyguard.” Looking at their faces, Bunny wondered ironically what assistance these washed-out night-revellers would be able to render if their self-appointed “ queen ” was ever attacked.

Although there were already present several celebrities—including a London merchant-prince, a deposed European monarch, and an amusing, if slightly contemptuous, Eastern potentate who threw up his throne because a Paris dancing girl would not leave her beloved boulevards—the arrival of Mrs. Niville concentrated universal attention. This walking jeweller’s shop had a considerable portion of her war-paint on this evening. Starting from the top, a diamond diadem could be noticed in her hair. This was only a few inches above a diamond band round her forehead. The joint effect was that the observer wanted an eye-shade.

Round her neck—one of the shapeliest in all Europe, let it be said—Mrs. Niville wore

not one but two necklaces. The upper one was of enormous pearls, and this fastened so tightly that it formed a collar. The other, consisting of hundreds of pearls, carefully graded in size, was strung in three great loops.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" gasped Norah.

"Not outside the Rue de la Paix."

But Bunny, lowering his eyes, discovered that the inventory was not yet complete: Mrs. Niville had further garnishings. She wore a diamond brooch at her corsage, a diamond girdle round what women used to call a waist, whilst both arms were covered to below the elbow with diamond bracelets.

"She must have at least a million dollars on her!" vouchsafed Norah; "the nerve of the woman!"

"Don't be jealous, Norah," mocked Chipstead, "just because you have had only one husband yourself! These things represent the spoils of matrimony. By the way, I'm glad you didn't attempt to rival the good lady in the matter of jewels to-night."

"As though I should show such taste—even if I owned them, Bunny. In any case, the best of my diamonds are at the jewellers being re-set. But what do you mean?"

"Come and dance," said her brother, leaving her curiosity unsatisfied.

It was round about one o'clock that the

manager made an unexpected announcement. This was to the effect that Ghika, the famous Russian *danseuse*, the new joy of Paris, had arrived and had kindly promised to give a short performance. The news was received with tremendous enthusiasm.

A silence came. A genius was about to cast her spell, and even the bibulous murmurings of the eastern potentate (very much *ex* by this time), owing to the promptings of his feminine entourage, became less audible.

The glare in the great room softened, and then died away, leaving only a rose-coloured limelight visible. This, emerging from a higher floor, played on the polished dancing-space in the centre, drenching it with romantic beauty.

A wave of the conductor's baton brought an opening, challenging chord from the hidden orchestra, commanding silence, and then, bursting into view like a naiad eager to taste the wonders of Life, Ghika emerged into that gleaming arena and commenced to dance.

The world knows Ghika's talent. Like the supreme artiste she is, she held that crowded gathering of sophisticates spellbound. Across the table Norah's hand groped for her brother's arm in the darkness.

"Oh, Bunny!" she breathed; "how marvellous—and how unexpected!"

That was the principal wonder of it. Ghika



could command tremendous fees, and yet apparently this visit after the theatre was a delight which she had planned spontaneously and offered without thought of any reward. Such are the ways of genius. . . . Occasionally.

She danced alone, with none to divert attention from her matchless art. For that was her way. Twenty-six or so, she looked a child—a rose plucked from a garden in which all was beautiful. Her feet moved in that warm-coloured flood of softly-glowing radiance so magically that it could scarcely be believed their owner did not belong to the fairy-folk. She floated through the air like some exquisite image of the mind, too fragile, too inexpressibly beautiful to be human.

It was only when she dropped to the floor in one final swoon of artistic delight that the reality reasserted itself. Then the applause came in a sustained thunderclap of noise.

“Oh, why did they awaken us?—we were all in a dream!” exclaimed Norah. She blinked as the great room became garish again with light.

As though in answer to her request, darkness fell once more.

“She’s dancing again!” cried a woman’s excited voice.

There was a tense hush of expectancy. The gloom, abysmal and absolute, nurtured the

impression that some further wonder was about to happen.

“Ghika!” rose the cry; and then again: “Ghika!”

Bunny half-rose from his chair. He, perhaps alone in that crowd, felt his instinct sending out a warning. Was this surprising darkness merely a clever piece of stage-management, or was it the prelude to something else?—something which would burst like a thunderbolt upon that enraptured throng of pleasure-seekers?

With nerve-tingling abruptness the realisation came. A moment before, the excitement had been of pleasure; now it was of fear. The intangibility of the unknown and the unforeseen had seized upon that crowd, and even the rich food and the richer wines they had taken could not counteract the cold chill which penetrated into their bones and sent icy waves shuddering down their spines.

Suddenly, a scream burst the tensed air. It had the effect of a bomb exploding. A woman's courage had snapped.

“Turn on the lights!” A man's voice this time, but sounding brittle and hysterical.

“Bunny!”

It was Norah. He drew her to his side and placed a protecting arm round her.

“Something must have gone wrong with the lights—don't worry.” He kept his voice steady,

so that he might reassure her, but all the while he was trying to think how best to get away. Already horror had broken out before them; chairs were being overturned; men's oaths and women's screams intermingled.

"Keep still, dear—I will get you away as soon as it's safe . . . if only those fools would keep their heads. . . ." He urged her back closer to the wall, which he meant to be their safety.

"Why are those people behaving like lunatics? They have only to wait. . . ."

Thank Heaven, Norah did not realise. She saw nothing untoward in the occurrence. With the crowd behaving like maniacs, the words were a tribute to her nerves.

But she had no inkling of the truth—the truth being that a mass-suggestion of fright had fallen upon the crowd, and had robbed them of self-restraint. The old jungle dread of the darkness had caught them by the throat, sending their hearts pounding, and fretting almost raw their unhealthy nerves.

The pitch blackness was split by a voice—a voice which added to the eeriness by being quickly cut off. The voice was recognised by Bunny as belonging to the manager, but it was distorted by an overwhelming anxiety.

"*Mesdames et Messieurs*—"

Then a choke—ghastly to hear—and then silence again.

"Bunny! Something dreadful has happened

—or is going to!” No infection is so quick to spread as fear; and now Norah had it. Imagination was hacking at her nerves.

“Keep cool, old girl.” The arm that was about her gave a reassuring squeeze. Bunny braced himself for what he knew to be inevitable. Soon—he hoped it would not be long delayed—an attack would come.

A second voice sounded—a voice this time that had the tang of authority and the cold finality of a sword sweeping through the air.

“Anyone who resists will be killed—beware! Those who make a noise will be silenced!”

It came from near the entrance to the restaurant, right across the room.

Silence. A stillness so profound that hearts could be heard thudding. Then followed movements, stealthy, soft-footed, significant; whisperings, too—evil, malicious, confident. Horrible it was.

“Don’t resist! They merely want your jewels,” whispered Bunny.

He hated himself for giving the advice, but what else could he do? Better the few ornaments which Norah wore than she should be molested. Of course, if any of the *canaille* put their filthy hands on her——

Then all thought of caution was blotted out. Dark shapes had sprung up in front, and two of them flung themselves at him.

He had just a second’s warning—and he made the best use of it. An upflung foot caught one

of the attackers in the stomach, the second was staggered by a swift smash to the jaw. He had withdrawn, almost unconsciously, his arm from his sister, and now, standing in front of her, on guard, was awaiting a further onslaught. He knew what these men were after and he was going to defend it with his life.

Foul, blistering oaths drooling from their lips, the two who had singled him out for attack, came again. A knife flashed, he heard the sound of splitting cloth, heard, too, his sister's agonised scream, felt a sharp pain in his breast—and then a whistle shrilled.

. . . He was down on one knee, and the press about him was so great that he could not rise. He expected further battle, but, strangely enough it did not come. That whistle! It must have been a warning, a signal for the looters to retire. The two who had attacked him must have obeyed with the rest.

“Norah! Where are you?” By this time, thrusting upwards, he had got upon his feet.

“Here, dear—oh, are you hurt? When I saw that knife. . . .!” Her voice trailed off.

“Not a scratch.” There was a note of elation in his voice which she could not understand.

“The danger's over,” he went on to reassure her; “that whistle was a signal from the Chief for his thugs to retire. Perhaps the Police are outside—I shouldn't be surprised.”

The prediction proved correct. Shortly afterwards the lights went up.

An extraordinary scene was disclosed. Dozens of women were almost mad through mingled feelings of fear, anger and mortification. Loudest of all in her protestations was Mrs. Niville. She was calling upon Heaven and man to witness her distress.

"Bunny—that gash?" Norah pointed to a long cut in her brother's dress coat on the left hand side. This had penetrated through cloth and underwear. A faint stain of blood could be seen.

"It's nothing—honestly!" he declared; "but it was lucky that whistle sounded when it did. Ah! here is Fouquières."

A tall, commanding man with an Imperial beard, and wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole, could be seen walking by the side of the manager of the restaurant. He held up his hand.

"I am Fouquières," he said; "you need have no further worry. Many of the thieves are already in our hands; those who escaped to-night will also be caught. Your jewels shall be restored to you." His keen eyes roved round the sea of faces and gleamed when he recognised Chipstead. With a word to the manager, he strode through the press and touched Bunny on the shoulder.

"To find you here, *mon ami!*" he exclaimed, his eyes twinkling. "Madame has not, I trust,

suffered any loss? But, *mon Dieu*, your coat. . . .”

“That’s all right, *maître*.” (Bunny knew it was a pardonable foible of the great Secret Police Chief’s to esteem being given the title); “no great harm was done. Permit me. My sister, Mrs. Hector Dawbarn, Monsieur Fouquières. We expected you to dine with us to-night; we reserved a seat at our table.”

“I am flattered, but——” He waved his hands in a gesture of not being able to comprehend.

Norah explained.

“What my brother should have said, M. Fouquières, was that, afraid that he would not be able to get a table by any other means, he used your name, and—I am terribly ashamed of him—told the manager you were to dine with us.”

The Police Chief startled the room by flinging back his shoulders and roaring with laughter.

“But that is droll!” Then his voice and manner quickly sobered.

“You have a brave brother, Madame,” he said, bending over the hand which Norah stretched out to him. “He protected you well to-night, I have no doubt.”

“I am anxious to get him home,” she said.

“Of course! You have a car? If not, I shall be pleased to place one at your disposal. Madame, I am the most fortunate of men. But

now I have work to do. Permit me to wish you good evening. Would you like one of my men to ride with you back to Paris ? ”

“ No, please don't trouble,” replied Chipstead; “ but when you have time I've got a story I would like you to hear,” he added in a lower tone.

“ Then come to my office in the morning—you will be most welcome. Once again, allow me to remark I am the most fortunate of men.”

## CHAPTER XVII

## BUNNY HEARS SOME NEWS

M. FOUQUIÈRES produced a box of cigars, a bottle of wine, two glasses, informed his secretary that on no account was he to be disturbed, and then beamed upon his caller.

“ And the wound, *mon cher* Chipstead ? ” he inquired.

Bunny lit one of the proffered cigars.

“ Nothing much more than a scratch,” he replied; “ my sister dressed it when we got home last night—her belief in iodine is something to be marvelled at.” He pulled at his cigar.



“It might have been serious, however,” he added.

“*Ma foi!*” declared the Chief of the Paris Secret Police; “the villain who used that knife might have killed you!”

“I wasn’t meaning that, *maître*,” with a long glance at the older man. “I want first of all to tell you a story and then to ask for your help.”

“Both my time and my assistance are at your disposal, my friend. It is not necessary for me to recall the services you have rendered to France.”

“Frankly,” continued the caller, after another long reflective pull at his cigar, “I intended to attempt this thing off my own bat—knowing that you would be pleased to help, I did not feel justified in worrying you. But, as circumstances have brought you into the business, I feel now that I must give you my confidence.”

M. Fouquières nodded, looking grave. He knew that some revelation of a serious nature was coming.

“It is curious how Fate arranges these things,” he commented; “I was very surprised to see you at the Château de Meurice last night, but when I did I resolved to seek your assistance in a problem just as you now say you desire my help. We, old comrades, will join in a fresh alliance. *Voilà!* And now, please, I am all attention.”

Bunny Chipstead regarded the spiral of blue smoke which had just passed from his lips.

“What is your idea of last night’s robbery, *maître*?” he asked.

M. Fouquières, to emphasise his reply, sharply rapped the desk before him with his knuckles.

“That affair was well planned,” he said; “but for a lucky chance—what you call a fluke—an item of information that drifted our way at the very last moment by the most fortunate circumstance, every woman in that room would have been forced to surrender every jewel she wore—as it was, a vast fortune was involved. But we have recovered a great deal, and we shall get back still some more.”

Chipstead inclined his head.

“It was good work, and I congratulate you, Chief. I don’t mind confessing that I was darned glad to hear that whistle; I guessed it meant the calling-off of the wolves. Any idea who planned the show?”

“We have arrested some of the most dangerous criminals in Paris.”

“Yes—yes; I haven’t any doubt of that; but have you got a line on the chap who planned the *coup*?”

“Those we have taken refuse to talk,” said M. Fouquières. “You know how it is—somehow, I believe they are afraid. Fear or loyalty—it is one or the other.”

“ I don't want you to think that I'm mad,” returned Chipstead; “ but supposing I told you that robbing those women of their jewels was merely a part and not the whole plan for last night.”

A well-kept hand went up to caress a trim moustache.

“ I have sufficient faith in your judgment to respect any view you may offer, my friend. Still—” and M. Fouquières shrugged.

“ Exactly! On the face of the evidence it certainly is ridiculous to credit that, with jewels of almost fabulous value involved, those crooks were concerned about anything apart from their loot. Yet—you remember the cut made in my dress-coat?”

“ But of course. Yet did not the ruffian attack you with his knife because you were keeping him from the jewels your sister wore?”

“ No,” was the astonishing reply; “ he tried to knife me because he imagined that I had in my possession something which he, or rather his principal, badly wanted.”

“ It is dramatic that which you tell me.”

“ And here's something else, *maitre*; do you remember an old friend of yours who used to call himself The Disguiser?”

The strong, muscular hands gripped the edges of the desk.

“ That one,” said the Police Chief tensely; “ but he is dead. We have had reports——”

“So have we in England. Rumours of the same sort have also crossed the ocean to America. But here’s an item of news, Chief: I believe The Disguiser is not only alive, but in Paris! And he was behind that robbery at the Château de Meurice last night!”

Fouquières, to Bunny’s surprise, received the information, which he showed by his demeanour had startled him, in silence. He appeared to be thinking deeply. At last: “I wonder,” he muttered, as though addressing himself, “I wonder. However,” raising his eyes, looking at Chipstead and speaking more briskly, “that can wait. As I have said, I respect your judgment; and now let me hear your story—for that you have one to tell me is certain.”

“You will not misunderstand me,” commenced Bunny, “when I say by way of preface that this is for your private ear alone.”

“I quite understand. If,” with a significant smile, “these walls could only speak—but, my friend, I am eager to listen. Please do not aggravate my devouring curiosity any longer.”

In slow, careful sentences, Bunny proceeded to narrate the events in which he had been concerned since receiving the wireless messages on board the *Aquitania*.

“If I could only see some daylight I wouldn’t so much mind,” he went on to confess; “but I have the feeling that the man who has schemed

the whole thing is laughing up his sleeve. He has Sir Robert Heddingly safe, and he's going to make use of him when he thinks the time is ripe. But what his game is I cannot imagine."

"Perhaps I can," put in Fouquières. "But finding the hat with part of the secret word in it? What do you make of that?"

"I believe it was nothing but a red herring—something carefully planned to make me appear a fool and to get me out of the way. But for two things I would leave for England at once."

"And these two things?"

"One, the appearance on the train of the man I know only as 'Pearson,' and two, the fact that a deliberate attack was made on me last night with the purpose of securing the package I've told you about."

"This package: did you have it on you?"

"Yes. I was afraid to leave it in my flat. Foolish, perhaps, but I imagined it would be safer on me."

M. Fouquières smiled deprecatingly.

"There is still a great deal of youth about you, *mon ami*. Now, if you please, one or two questions. What you have told me is of quite absorbing interest."

"I imagined it might be—fire away."

"The man—that one who was killed in Hyde Park—can you describe him? If you give

me a description I will have a search made among the records, you understand."

"That would be useful. I was going to ask Cuvilier to do something of the sort. It's a pity he's detained at Marseilles."

"Gaston Cuvilier is a clever agent, but we must endeavour to get along without him," answered M. Fouquières, who, great man as he might be, was not without his little human weaknesses. "Describe this man, my friend."

"I'll do my best, but I am afraid it will not help you a great deal. He was small, very insignificant; badly-dressed, had a scrubby moustache, looked like a poor-graded Insurance agent or cheap commercial traveller, but was absolutely sick with fear. There was no possible doubt about it; the poor devil was shaking with terror. Beyond that . . . but one moment, though; yes, there was something; he had a wart on the left side of the nose. It was quite small, and to tell the truth, although I was looking for some distinguishing mark, of course, it was only when I stood over his dead body that night in Hyde Park that I noticed it."

Fouquières made a note on a pad.

"That wart!—how important are the small things, the details!" he said. "The man's age?"

"Roughly—forty. He may have been a little older."

“ I will have inquiries made at once. And now : this disappearance of Sir Robert—it has been kept secret, you say ? ”

“ Yes. You can understand the position ; we were not anxious for it to get known that we were unable to find our Chief ! But it will be impossible very soon to prevent the news from leaking out.”

“ Quite impossible,” agreed M. Fouquières. Chipstead looked at the speaker keenly.

“ Is there any particular significance to that remark ? ” he inquired.

“ What it is I will tell you later, *mon ami*. Now let me give you a confidence in return for yours. We, of the Paris Police, are faced at the present time with one of the biggest problems of this century. I tell you for two reasons : the first is because I wish for your help and the second is because the British Secret Service, although they do not know it at present, are bound to be deeply involved. I crave your fullest attention. For some months past false British, American, Venezuelan and French bank-notes have been circulated in France. Passports, court records and Consular documents have also been forged. All these have been made in a secret factory, and what evidence we have been able to collect points to it being here in Paris. The head of the gang is evidently a clever one, for it was only this week that the fraud has been detected. A den equipped with the most up-to-date engraving plant is

somewhere in Paris, or the outskirts—and we have to find it. *Mon ami*, I ask for your help ! ”

Chipstead, although Fouquières spoke with almost ponderous gravity, could not help smiling.

“Forgive me, *maître*,” he said, “but whilst I am willing to do anything I can, you mustn’t forget that my first job is to find Heddingly. It is now practically a fortnight since he vanished and the matter is vital.”

The Police Chief smiled somewhat enigmatically.

“If you will help me, I will help you ; and who knows but what each may not find his reward at the end of the journey ? As for your own quest, what about the packet of cipher notes ? Have you got it with you ? ”

Chipstead pulled a small black packet out of his breast-pocket.

“Here it is,” he stated, placing it on the desk. “The whole thing is in cipher, as I’ve told you, but what the key is I can’t imagine. I’ve had several shots at it, but it’s beaten me entirely so far.”

So far from giving the hearer any distress, the information appeared to brighten the other’s interest.

“Reading secret correspondence such as this,” said Fouquières, after a quick glance through the pages which made up the packet, “requires special gifts. So do not be



discouraged. Your work has not lain particularly in that direction; you have been 'in the field'—'on active service'; the experts who unravel these things sit in an office. Would you mind one of my own men having a go at this?"

"Carry on! In fact, I had come to the decision this morning, after reflecting upon last night's occurrence, that the contents of that packet must be so valuable that it was my plain duty to return to England and have a chin-wag with the Foreign Office experts."

"You might not be allowed to reach England, my friend—have you considered that?"

Chipstead thrust his face forward in a characteristic fighting attitude.

"I came across—and I could go back," he said.

"Now, now, my friend," soothed Fouquières; "I had no intention of disparaging your personal bravery or your resource in an awkward corner. What I meant to convey was this: I believe with you that your enemy has induced you to come to France, using that fisherman's story as a bait, because he thinks he can deal with you better here. That is why I made the remark. To return, however, to the art of secret correspondence deciphering, the very fact that these communications are in cipher, apart altogether that a man has lost his life, shows that the contents are valuable. Consequently, it must be deciphered without a

moment's delay further. Permit me: I will ring for Dupresne, my expert." Leaning back, he pressed a bell in the wall. "A former Professor and something of an oddity, that one," he continued; "you must not mind if he starts reading us a lecture. For myself, I try to be a philosopher; occasionally I permit myself to be bored by Dupresne because I know from experience he invariably delivers what you call 'the goods.' *Entrez!*" he called in a louder voice.

A short, bearded man with a pair of rusty-rimmed *pince-nez* perched precariously upon a bulbous nose, entered the room. He was slovenly dressed—traces of a long-eaten egg were visible on his overflowing waistcoat and he was round-shouldered through much bending over a desk.

"Dupresne," said the Police Chief, "be happy; we have a puzzle here which will tax your ingenuity to the uttermost! Prepare for sleepless nights!"

Bunny felt like grinning. The scene was so preposterous. Standing before Fouquières as a child might stand before its teacher, this man with the great dome of a forehead, probably a prodigy of learning, smiled as one who has been paid a compliment. As for Fouquières, his manner betokened the attitude of an owner putting a freakish animal through its paces.

"I want you to decipher this, Dupresne—and speed is essential."

The expert handled the package tenderly, turned the pages with something approaching reverence and gave a queer cry which Bunny took to denote pleasure.

"This is a rare—a beautiful specimen!" he said in a high-pitched voice; "*merci, Monsieur!*"

He ducked his great head at Fouquières, made an inclination of his body towards Chipstead and turned to the door. The packet, Bunny noticed, he held tightly in both hands.

"I have informed M. Chipstead, my English friend, whose packet this is, that you know a little of ciphers, Dupresne." The Police Chief winked at Bunny. The remark had evidently been intended to provoke the expert into the promised disquisition.

Dupresne wheeled. Behind his *pince-nez* his eyes were gleaming.

"Apart from Gross, and possibly Lavigne, I fear no man," he declared so emphatically that the remark was robbed of any pomposity. "I may say, without egotism, that I am considered to have a special aptitude for the work. Granted this aptitude, and given also perseverance, the most stubborn problems are bound to yield satisfactory results—in time."

"'In time' will not do in this case, Dupresne; I have already told you speed is essential." Fouquières winked again at Chipstead.

"What living man can do, I will do,"

declared Dupresne, almost in a frenzy. "I will neither sleep nor eat until I have been successful. As I have said, this is a splendid specimen, and, I have no doubt, it will tax me to the uttermost. But I shall triumph—I shall assuredly triumph. And now, time being, as you say, essential, I will go." He turned a second time and quickly departed.

"I thought you might be interested in one of his lectures," remarked Fouquières, his lips twitching.

"And now for what I was about to tell you twenty minutes ago," he said. He had made one of his characteristic swift changes. Gone was the smile, gone was the jesting manner; the Police Chief was now an official holding a position of almost overwhelming responsibility.

"It is true that Dupresne must work quickly," he said; "next week a Conference of the Secret Services of certain friendly nations is to be held. Ah! you did not know that?"

"I certainly did not," replied Chipstead.

"It has just been decided; I learned myself only this morning. *Pourparlers* have been proceeding for some time, however. Certain grave symptoms in the International situation have developed—how grave can only be conjectured at present. Enough that stringent steps must be taken. That is why this Conference of those who work underground and in the shadows has been called."

"Where?"

“ In London or Paris. But does it matter? What matters from your point of view, my friend, is that Sir Robert Heddingly must be present at that meeting. His position in the British Secret Service demands it. His absence would provoke talk, gossip, speculation. He must be found before then. You agree? ”

“ I certainly do, ” was the answer.

## CHAPTER XVIII

## PURSUIT

TO idle in the vicinity of the Square at Bournemouth, just as dusk is falling on a fine winter's afternoon, is an agreeable enough occupation. Bournemouth, in many respects the most delightful town in England, has no manufacturing murk; no smoke-clouds hang like a pall over it; there is comparatively little commerce done and that little is of a refined character like the buying of jewels, clothes and land on which to build a residence that shall be a credit to the eye as well as a pleasure to the body. Incidentally, Bournemouth boasts more beautiful houses than any other town of its size in the country.

Matthews, walking up that exceedingly pleasant thoroughfare Old Christchurch-road,

on the way to the General Post Office, paused to look in at Smith's bookshop, thronged, as usual, with people, and forgot for the moment the anxiety that was gnawing at his mind. Matthews, surprisingly enough, perhaps, considering his occupation, was a passionate entomologist. When he was not endeavouring to catch criminals he sought to catch butterflies. In the window of the bookshop was a large tome open to display a fascinating page of coloured specimens. Matthews, feasting his eyes, felt as though his mind had been dipped in some healing stream; then, recalled to the present, he sighed and passed on.

Old Christchurch-road, which is the Bond-street of Bournemouth, was crowded. The shops, brilliantly lit, looked their best—Matthews could well have loafed but for the telephone call which he was due to put in to McNalty, acting Chief of X2. Duty was duty, however, and he turned round by the hat-shop, forsaking the glittering and fascinating highway for the prosaic side-street.

Walking up to the counter he gave the London number and waited for the call to be connected. The clerk had said, in answer to his inquiry, that probably he would be able to get through quickly. But chance had it that he did not even wait; no words of his went over the wire to McNalty that afternoon.

For, leaning against the counter, watching the crowds entering and leaving the building,

the X2 man suddenly felt a swift tingling of his nerves. A man had come in through the heavy swing door. As he caught sight of him, Matthews muttered beneath his breath and half turned away his head. Then, to be on the safe side, he lounged over to the other end of the big room where the extra telephone booths were situated, his face still averted.

What a stroke of fortune! His luck had been out ever since he had been put on to this case, but now the tide had turned. This was the man for whom he had unsuccessfully combed the New Forest during the last few days—and now he had turned up like this, fallen right across him, in fact.

In leaving for Paris, Chipstead had warned him about this man. "If he is not the escaped lunatic, then he is the man who shot at me to kill. Find him; he will open up an interesting line of country."

He did not want to be mistaken. He must make sure. But there could not be two persons in the vicinity of Bournemouth whose mouths were twisted on one side in that peculiar and repulsive manner. This must be the man Chipstead had described—the man (and here Matthews, for all his previous experience, felt his breath coming in short, sudden gasps) whom Chipstead had hinted might hold the clue to the whole mystery.

He watched the fellow closely. The man turned to the left and wrote out a telegram.

It must have been a fairly long message, for it occupied him for several moments. With the telegraph form in his hand, he walked up to the counter, disregarding the looks which everyone bestowed upon him, and handed it to the clerk who came forward. The clerk glanced curiously at him and then turned to his business of counting the number of words.

At that moment Matthews walked out of the place. As the door swung behind him, he heard a telephone bell ringing shrilly. Then came a shout ; the clerk was warning him that his call to London was through.

He disregarded both. McNalty must wait ; he had something more important on hand. If he spoke to London, his bird would get away.

To the left of the post-office in the direction of the Old Christchurch-road, was the entrance to a big motor-garage, and it was in the shadow of this that Matthews halted. A mechanic, wearing greasy overalls, was smoking a cigarette.

"I may want a car—have you one ready now?"

"I can have one ready in half a minute, sir. Where do you want to go?"

"The New Forest. I'll drive myself—here's some money." He thrust a £5 note into the man's hand and, the astonished mechanic gone, turned anxiously to watch the Post-office entrance again.

Within a few seconds the man he meant to



track down emerged. Matthews had presumed that the other had a car, and he was not disappointed, for the man walked across the road and started to crank up a low-built, powerful-looking two-seater. It was difficult to see distinctly for the lighting of the road was not good, but Matthews was able to guess that the engine of this car possessed plenty of power.

He turned to find the mechanic at his elbow.

"We shall want your name and address, sir, if you please."

Matthews gave his name, hotel, and the name of his bank.

"That is all right," said the mechanic, mollified; "it's merely a matter of business."

"I quite understand—and now for the car. I want to be off."

"I'll bring it out at once—it's a Delage—can do sixty if you open her out. May I ask what time you expect to be back, sir?"

"You're open all night, I take it?"

"Yes—someone's here, sir."

"Well, that's good enough—tell the manager I hope to be back before midnight. Plenty of petrol in? Everything ready for a journey?"

"Yes, sir. There's enough petrol to last you to London and back."

"All right."

A moment later Matthews was at the wheel. Twisted-Mouth was already threading a way

towards the Old Christchurch-road. The game was on.

When the two-seater emerged into the well-lit main road, Matthews was able to confirm his previous opinion that it was a Bugatti. The thing looked as though it could travel; well, so could a Delage if it was anything up to standard.

The man in front had no suspicion he was being followed, apparently, and swept round the corner quite unconcerned.

The busy traffic kept the pace of both cars down to a mere twenty miles an hour until Lansdowne was reached, and here a policeman held up his hand for the Delage to stop. The Bugatti, a bare thirty yards ahead, had slipped by before the constable gave the signal.

At this point the main road widened considerably, and, although trams ran along it, there was much more room. Matthews had the mortification of seeing the man he was tracking increasing his speed.

He could not let him get away.

He saw the policeman's angry face, heard him demand: "What d'ye think you're doing?" and then was off.

The next half a mile was covered at a speed which caused everyone he passed to turn back and stare. But he had his reward for, nearing a dangerous bend, he saw a car which looked like the Bugatti, climbing the short hill which stretched ahead. He crept to within a dozen

yards and commenced to breathe more easily. The policeman at Lansdowne had probably taken the number of the car, but he would settle with the garage proprietor over that.

Congestion came again as they passed through the suburb of Boscombe, but after going at a snail's pace for several hundred yards, the Bugatti turned quickly to the right, and, following, Matthews found himself in a road that might have been fashioned for motoring. He caught the name as he opened up; it was Carberry Avenue.

The two-seater was now fairly zipping along; it was doing a good forty-five. With a silent prayer Matthews responded to the challenge. So far his engine was working splendidly, and if the mechanic could be believed, he had no fear that the two-seater could out-distance him.

They were leaving the town rapidly behind now. Ahead stretched the gloom-shrouded, brooding countryside, the darkness of which was only relieved by a few isolated lights here and there. But for the drone of the engine in front it would have been difficult for him to follow, so sharp were many of the turns in the different roads. And there was this danger: if he trod too closely on his heels, Twisted-Mouth might get the idea that he was being followed. It was probable that, engaged in his nefarious work, the man would be naturally suspicious.

Here was a problem. Matthews attempted to solve it by taking what he decided was the smaller risk. And this, in the circumstances, was allowing the other to become suspicious rather than stand the chance of losing him altogether. In one respect the X2 man knew himself to be at a great disadvantage: the other must have an infinitely better knowledge of the country. Beyond the fact that he knew the Bugatti was heading straight for the New Forest, his own information was scanty. This was a new route to him, the roads were exceedingly tricky and the darkness had become by this time intense.

The road narrowed, the black mass immediately ahead became stationary. The driver of the Delage wondered what had happened. Had Twisted-Mouth decided he was being deliberately followed and had he resolved to bring matters to an issue?

Matthews was not a coward—he would not have had his present job if he had been—but he felt annoyed that he did not have a revolver with him. Twisted-Mouth could be depended upon to be carrying a gun—hadn't he nearly given Bunny Chipstead his ticket for the next world?—and thus held a material advantage. Still, if it was going to be a fight . . . and perhaps that would be the way out. If he once got the fellow powerless, he'd force something of the truth out of him.

Slipping quietly out of the driver's seat, he

prepared himself by going forward. But he had walked only a few yards when he had to check a laugh. What had happened was merely this: The two-seater had been held up on a small bridge over a stream and a man in uniform was taking a toll from the driver!

Two minutes later he had himself passed over twopence halfpenny to the thumb-fingered collector, had received a ticket and the information that after eleven o'clock no charge would be made, and had zoomed on. Eleven o'clock! A great deal might happen between then and eleven o'clock.

He was now right in the country, and the road was not better than the average country lane. The Bugatti had gained a good lead through the toll-gate delay, and her tail lights were no longer in sight. Putting on increased speed, Matthews narrowly escaped death through collision with the cart of an itinerant basket-seller at some cross-roads two hundred yards ahead.

The risk had been so great that the gypsy's face showed white beneath its grime. He started cursing in a tongue which was uncouth and strange.

"Which way did the car in front—the two-seater—go?" asked Matthews, pushing some money into the Romany's hand.

The gypsy, who was standing beneath a signpost, with his back to it, pointed straight in front.

“ It were goin’ to Ringwood,” he said, using now the speech of the Hampshire rustic.

“ Thank you.”

Matthews, believing the man to be telling the truth, made a sharp turn and swung the car into the narrow road. Just before he opened out, he fancied he could hear the beat of another engine.

It was a nightmare chase now. He went at a reckless pace, driving blind, not knowing when he might not smash up both the car and himself. Twice disaster was only averted by a hairsbreadth—a motor cyclist elected to go clean into the hedge rather than be killed, and in the very nick of time Matthews swerved to avoid the pond which stood on the left of a dangerous hairpin bend. As he slowed down temporarily, he heard church bells tolling slowly from some neighbouring village, and marvelled at the incongruity of Life. In such sweet rural beauty as this was being staged a drama dark and mysterious.

Yet another sharp turn to the left, and the Delage passed over another small bridge beneath which flowed a placid stream, then he came out upon a broad road. And, glory be, he could hear in the distance another car!

Followed a level crossing, across which he pelted as though he was figuring in some stage melodrama, and then further cross-roads—the whole of Hampshire seemed infested with cross-roads that night—and then out upon

another decent piece of road which he guessed, but did not know, must lead to Southampton.

The darkness had increased perceptibly. The roadway was obscured by shadows. His nerves were becoming ragged through the strain of driving.

"Hell!"

He snapped the imprecation, ramming home the brakes. Some shapeless mass had materialised, to hover right in front of the car. As he swerved, a shrill neigh sounded, and the creature vanished.

So great had been the shock that the X2 man felt his forehead wet. Beads of perspiration commenced to trickle down his face. He had remembered hearing of the danger motorists in the vicinity of the New Forest ran from the habit of the small ponies, which are bred in the district, wandering blindly across the roads at night.

Again he had lost time. Waiting for a moment to try to catch the sound of the car which he knew must be somewhere in front, he threw in the clutch once more and hoped for the best. Very few houses now showed, and the country was becoming more desolate every hundred yards.

He drove at such a pace that the car rocked; the road seemed to be rising up to defy him, the trees were like ghostly figures flitting past in desperate haste to be gone from the scene of disaster which threatened.

Ahead lights showed. They stood out startlingly against the blackness. Approaching, he saw that they illuminated a petrol-filling station. A man showed himself as the car slowed down.

“ Filling-up, sir ? ”

“ No—on the way back I may . . . I say, have you noticed a Bugatti two-seater pass ? ”

The reply gave him heart.

“ Five minutes ago, sir—up towards Burley. That way, sir,” the speaker added, pointing to his right.

“ Thanks.”

Then off again, climbing gently upwards, and cutting into a solid wall of blackness, against which the road showed like a white ribbon against a woman’s dark hair. He guessed that he was on some moorland for the wind came driving across from the left, chilling him as he bent to the wheel.

A countryman, carrying a lantern, was seen like a figure on some fantastic film.

Again he had to slow down.

“ Which is the way to Burley ? ” he shouted.

The man looked as stupid as a sheep. Still, he knew the answer ; considering that he had been born within five hundred yards of where he stood and that he had lived all his life in the district, this was not, perhaps, to be marvelled at.

“ Turn to yer left—then keep straight on till you get to village.”



"Much obliged to you." Matthews was becoming tired of saying "thanks."

He found the village all right—a mere handful of scattered houses—and halted, puzzled, at a stone cross which he took to be the usual war memorial. One or two men were loafing round this, and he decided to speak to them.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine in a two-seater car who went on ahead of me," he said; "have you noticed anyone pass this way?"

The rustics turned to each other.

"There be one that passed," remarked the nearest man after a pause. His tone was sullen, almost sour.

Matthews pushed ahead.

"My friend unfortunately has a deformity—his mouth is on one side," he continued.

"Well, if it be he that you're looking for, mister, he be gone up to Moor View."

"That's where he's staying, isn't it? I'm going to spend a few days with him, you see. I expect he'll be wondering where I am. Thanks very much. Er—which is the way to Moor View?"

The man who had done all the talking pointed with a gnarled forefinger.

"Up there, mister—but you'll never get that car up; you'll 'ave ter walk. You can't mistake the 'ouse, though; there be only the one."

"Oh, thanks. But I expect my friend will see to the car all right—good-night."

He drove slowly on. After a quarter of a mile or so he came to a kind of clearing. The road seemed to end here and take on the appearance of a rough cart-track. This, undoubtedly, led to Moor View.

Now what to do? The first thing was to abandon the car, and cache it here against his return. The Bugatti had gone up that cart-track, presumably, but he wasn't going to follow suit. The Delage might be stranded in mud; and, in any case, a car would be heard. If he went at all—and of course he was going—it would have to be on foot.

Shutting off his lights and stopping the engine after turning the car round, he got out and, with the aid of a pocket electric torch, started to move slowly forward. If this was actually his stronghold, the enemy had chosen well. The rough track led into a wood, and the branches of the trees formed in some places an archway over his head as he walked.

Matthews had not gone more than a couple of hundred yards before he stopped, the torch dying in his hand. Twisted-Mouth, unless his eyes were playing a trick, was directly ahead. His car had stopped through some reason, carburetter trouble perhaps, and he was coaxing it to go.

There was no fear of his being seen—presuming that the other had not noticed the gleam of his torch—and the only danger in drawing nearer was of his foot stepping on some snapping stick.

He took the risk, and got to within a few yards.

It was as he had supposed. The engine had ceased functioning. Twisted-Mouth had lifted up the hood and was peering into the Bugatti's bowels. The thought came to Matthews to spring on the man from behind, overpower him and put such fear into his soul as to make him tell what he knew! Then, as he was about to move forward, remembrance came. Had not Chipstead told him the man he had encountered was a mute!

Just then the car went slowly forward and the tracker followed.

On hands and knees like some prowling animal nosing through undergrowth, he approached the light. This shone from a window on the ground-floor. His clothes were torn—barbed wire had had to be negotiated on the way here—he was bespattered with grime, and there was a nasty cut in his right hand. But the light had drawn him like a magnet.

Moor View was a Georgian house—artistic in its simple design—and surrounded by spacious grounds. It was well-named, standing as it did upon a rising knoll, which must have commanded views on all sides for many miles around. The rough track had ended at the big gate leading into a carriage-drive. It was through this gate that Matthews had seen the Bugatti turn twenty minutes before.

Crouched beneath the low hedge he waited, expecting to hear voices. Not a sound came, except the sough of the wind in the trees which shadowed the house in front.

Cautiously he raised his head and looked into the room.

One glance and he trembled with excitement.

A man was inside that room—and the man was Sir Robert Heddingly!

## CHAPTER XIX

## THE SNARE

**M**ATTHEWS might have imagined he was dreaming if he had not taken a second look. Although the greater part of the man's face was turned away from him, obscured by shadow, yet there could be no mistake. The clothes, the build, the greying hair—and, most important of all in the circumstances, the fact that the man was bound hand and foot to a chair.

So intense was his feeling of satisfaction that he lowered his head again. He wanted just a few moments in which to allow his gratification to flood through him. After the terrible monotony, the inconclusiveness, the general heart-break of the past fortnight, to make this

discovery! True, the principal credit must go to Chipstead, but, after all, he was the man on the spot. It was he who had actually found the Chief. This moment had been worth the waiting and the striving. Although not a religious man, Matthews felt like murmuring a prayer. . . .

A more sober mood came, as was inevitable. He had found Heddingly, but now he had to get him away. But that should not be too difficult. Once inside the room—and he had already noticed that the window was open at the top—he could cut the Chief's bonds, and get him out of the house and into the grounds. In the room would be something he could use as a weapon, a poker perhaps. . . .

It had to be done at once, however; he dared not wait. Someone might come into that room at any moment.

He tried the window. It moved upwards smoothly, the friction making scarcely any sound. When he had raised it a couple of feet he stepped into the room.

One pause to try to catch any sound, and then he tip-toed across the room. Even though the need for haste was so urgent, he had to see if it were possible to lock the door on the inside. In this he was frustrated, as he had expected to be—the Chief's gaolers had turned the key on the other side of the door. Then why the unfastened window?

Without waiting to deliberate on the point,

he crossed to the fireplace. In the corner furthest from the window was the chair to which Heddingly was bound.

His knife ready, he bent over.

"Chief!" he whispered.

Then two things happened.

A step sounded . . . and someone laughed.

Matthews swung round quickly. That laugh had jarred his nerves. It brought the first warning that he had stepped into a trap.

Two men, one of whom was the repulsive-faced mute, were standing between him and the window. Where they had come from he could not guess, but they must have entered the room through some other means than the door. Each had a revolver and both weapons were trained on him.

Then a voice spoke—a voice behind him.

"Let me offer you welcome, Mr. Matthews," it said.

When he turned, the X2 man felt like gasping. The bound figure in the chair had gone; in its place was a man whose face he had never seen before—a man who was a complete stranger to him.

"You are looking for your superior, Sir Robert Heddingly," went on a mocking voice. "For my diversion I staged a little transformation scene."

Matthews did not reply. He felt too

humiliated. Any words would have choked him.

“ I flatter myself that the whole scheme was rather neat. Voost, the mute who serves me—sometimes with an excess of zeal—made a grave mistake the other day. He shot at a gentleman called Chipstead—I understand that he has some sort of a connection with Heddingly and yourself, Matthews—but unfortunately missed. He should have killed him, of course. When he informed me of the fact, I had to see what could be done. Having made arrangements for Chipstead to go to Paris, there was you to be considered. Not that, my dear Matthews, you amounted to a great deal—in the circumstances I trust you will forgive the frankness—but still there was the strong possibility of Chipstead before his departure having told you of his encounter with Voost, and, with my plans in another direction rapidly approaching fruition, I could not afford to run any risk.

“ By following Voost from the Bournemouth post-office to-night you, however, saved me any further worry, and solved the problem yourself. Voost happened to catch a glimpse of your face so far back as the Old Christchurch road and it was simple after that to prepare for your coming. When Voost arrived here, he told me the whole story of the thrilling chase—I confess I found it most entertaining. . . . No, Matthews, I should not contemplate doing anything violent. You wish to live, I suppose,

and at the first hostile move you would be riddled with bullets. . . . As you must be tired after your recent exertions, you had better sit down." The speaker lifted an arm and Matthews heard a chair being placed into position behind him.

He sat down. He was still sick with humiliation and prostrated by astonishment. This was the man behind the kidnapping of Sir Robert, of course. What had he meant about the arrangements for Chipstead to go to Paris? Had Chipstead been lured into a trap like himself?

The other, arrogant through success, seemed fond of hearing his own voice.

"You can smoke if you like—no, please do not put your hands into your pockets. . . . Wagner, pass the cigarettes to Mr. Matthews."

The second armed man approached, placed a case of cigarettes and a box of matches on a small table within reach, and then deftly ran his fingers over the X2 man's clothes.

"You do not appear to have brought a revolver—well, then, there need be no further unpleasantness—that's right, do smoke!" Matthews, to endeavour to appear at his ease, had taken a cigarette from the case and lit it. He did not attempt to reply to the question.

"Being naturally so curious a man, I am sure you are anxious to hear my intentions," resumed the taunting voice; "you will be kept here for



another week. At the end of that time I shall probably have succeeded in my endeavour, and then will come the question whether you will be allowed to go free or whether . . . but for the moment we need not go into that. Now with regard to Miss Courtenay. She is well, I hope? ”

Matthews continued stolidly to smoke his cigarette. If one of these armed gaolers left the room he would make a dash for it.

“ I trust she is well enough to pay me a visit quite soon. She has come down to Bournemouth to find her father and it would be unnatural not to bring them together. Don't you agree? ”

The man addressed assumed a nonchalance which, in its way, was a minor masterpiece of acting. The mention of the girl had caused Matthews the gravest fears. But he kept his voice firm as he said: “ So you really have the Chief in this house? ”

“ I didn't say so,” quickly retorted the other; “ I merely remarked that, considering Miss Courtenay's very understandable anxiety, it would be unnatural to refuse to re-unite her and her father if one had the power to do so.”

“ I give you credit for nerve,” said Matthews. Could he induce the man to dispense with at least one of his bodyguard?

“ Nerve? But it was very simple, believe me. I wished to have Sir Robert Heddingly as my guest for a week or so. It was necessary that I should obtain a suitable residence. How fortunate to find the very place I wanted through

looking down the personal column of *The Times* ! Wonderful paper, *The Times* ! You should read it."

Matthews came to the point.

"Chipstead was right, then," he said ; " he believed we should find the Chief somewhere in the New Forest."

The other laughed.

"How gratifying it must be to you to find your colleague's prediction correct. But now you know, may I ask what you intend to do about it ?"

Matthews shrugged his shoulders.

"Chipstead will be back from Paris very soon."

The stranger yawned.

"From the beginning I have been outguessing this Chipstead, planning always one move ahead. In London I set false clues so that he might be drawn to Bournemouth, and once here I fooled him again. Now that he is in Paris, he will be attended to. He will never return to England."

The speaker's tone chilled Matthews' blood. Yet he laughed.

"I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, but I'm willing to back Bunny Chipstead. He isn't such a good talker, but he delivers the goods all the same."

The reply was swift.

"It is now a quarter to seven. Within a few hours Chipstead will be dead !"

“Murdered? You damned swine——!”

He was quick, but those behind were quicker. Directly they saw him rise from the chair, they moved; and before he could reach the stranger they were on him.

Matthews put up a good fight, but the others were armed and paid no attention to the rules. A smashing blow on the head from the butt of a revolver and the X2 man staggered; another, and he fell senseless to the floor.

“Take him below,” was the order.

#### CHAPTER XX AN EVENING WITH TOMMY BOYNE

**A**T practically the same time as Matthews was being overpowered, Bunny Chipstead, a frown on his face, turned into the Rue du Caumartin, a street leading off the main Paris boulevard. He was in a cheerless mood, being bitterly conscious of failure.

He had gone a hundred yards or so in a preoccupied manner when he felt his shoulder tapped. Swinging round, prepared to be angry, he saw a familiar face.

It was impossible to brood very long when in the presence of Tommy Boyne. Nothing

short of an earthquake or the mention of that ill-fated musical comedy "Girlie Mine," which had died a deserved death after only six melancholy performances and in which he had been engaged to "star," could arrest that torrential flow of patter which was his chief conversational characteristic.

"Hello, hello, hello!" the comedian exclaimed; "whither away, old son?" Catching hold of Chipstead's arm, he drew him aside from the crowded pavement where they were being jostled by hurrying pedestrians, the majority of whom, judging by their animated gesticulations, might have been on their way to start various minor revolutions. The verbal fire of the Gaul never ceased to interest Chipstead.

He had to postpone his immediate study of this national mannerism, however, for Boyne was leading him into the English-speaking bar of the Hôtel St. Augustin. Leaning against the polished brass rail of this home from home, the comedian beamed at his companion.

"Well, well, well, fancy running across you like this, old horse . . . well, well, well——"

"Dry up, Tommy, and begin to ask me what I'll have," cut in Chipstead; "can't you see that the barman is eyeing you with the utmost suspicion? He must be thinking you're on the stage or something!"

"That's all right, sir—I know Mr. Boyne," replied the white-coated attendant, responding

to the wink which Chipstead had given him.

"Your manners are worse than your necktie, old boy," replied the comedian, pretending to be offended; "two of your special corpse-revivers, George," to the attendant.

When these potent potations were placed before them, Boyne lifted his glass.

"Happy days!"

"Chin-chin!"

*Rapprochement* having been established in the time-honoured fashion, conversation continued. In answer to Bunny's inquiry, the comedian stated that he had "hopped" across to give a once-over to some film prospects. He didn't know if anything would come of it, but, in the meantime, he was having a very good time and that was about all that mattered.

"Of course, you will have to dine with me to-night," he continued; "and then afterwards we'll turn into the Haussmann Club to get some poker."

Bunny whistled softly.

"Didn't know you could run to the Haussmann, Tommy," he remarked; "the sky's the limit there." He shared the knowledge common to every man who knew his Paris that the Haussmann was the most notorious gambling-club in the French capital.

The comedian smiled back.

"I have a curious habit," he explained, "when my luck is out—that is when I'm not

in a 'show'—I gamble. When I'm making money I leave the tables and the cards strictly alone. At the present time I'm poor, and with all the luck there is knocking about the world, not a bit of it is coming my way. That is why I intend to go to the Haussmann to-night—and I shall take it as an affront, old thingummy, if you don't ooze along with me."

"Oh, I'll come with you all right," replied Chipstead. With its cosmopolitan clientele and heavy wagering, the Haussmann was one of the most interesting rendezvous in Paris. Originally intended as a meeting place for those interested in the arts, it had developed into a club where the stakes at baccarat knew scarcely any limit. There was just the chance that he might pick up some sort of a clue there. He had to meet Fouquières, the Chief of Secret Police, again in the morning and he would like to take some useful information along with him. It was stupid, he supposed, especially considering the circumstances, but he resented the thought that he was to be indebted to someone else for the unravelling of that packet puzzle.

"You look as though you had mislaid the Family War Loan, old son!" declared Tommy Boyne, regarding him sternly; "my God, it's hard to meet the friend of one's youth, to buy him drink, to give him generally the merry Ha! Ha!, and then to receive nothing but the stony visage. Heave to, my lad, and let's see

a smile illumine the less hollow portions of your ghastly countenance ! ”

“ Anything to stop that paralysing patter of yours, Tommy. We’ll have another of those undertaker’s pet poisons. But I must telephone first.”

“ If it’s a best girl, say you’re sorry but you’ve just met your only brother home from the wilds and that you really must give him dinner to-night.”

“ Don’t be a worse ass than usual,” was the comment.

Norah, who was the recipient of the telephone message which Bunny sent, quite understood the position.

“ Of course, my dear,” she said ; “ you have been tied to my apron-strings too much. I shall have a quiet evening at home, but you go off with your musical comedy friend and enjoy yourself.”

That was that, and Bunny returned to swallow his second corpse-reviver with a more or less clear conscience.

Tommy Boyne declared that he had a preference for Larue’s, that famous restaurant in the Place de la Madeleine, and thither they went. A sight which interested Chipstead slightly but Boyne not at all was watching a very famous French statesman dispose of several courses. His was an illustrious name, but he was a horrid eater.

"The amount of publicity these damned politicians get is simply nauseating," Boyne complained, glowering at several waiters rushing forward to help the great man on with his overcoat. "What are politics? Nothing but a farce, with both sides trying to do the dirty on each other and the poor public suffering all the time."

"You've got confoundly depressing yourself, my lad," said Chipstead; "those corpse-revivers must have touched your liver up the wrong way."

"Just professional jealousy, old boy," confessed the comedian with delightful frankness; "when I saw Griolet just now, I thought of all the newspaper space he's occupied which, from my point of view, might have been devoted to a much better cause."

"Get on with your oysters," urged Bunny; "chuck shop and let's enjoy ourselves." Chipstead was anxious to forget worries himself that night; neither of the two letters he had written to Susan Courtenay had received a reply. He could not understand what had happened. If there was no letter in the morning he would wire. But for that night he was willing to banish care, worry, trouble and all the rest of the army of unpleasantnesses.

If there is one restaurant in Paris which can be depended upon to get a diner interested in his food, it is Larue's. There may be others



as good but certainly none better. The *maître d'hôtel* had succeeded in admirable fashion ; courses and wines had been excellently chosen.

“ So far so good,” said Tommy Boyne when they had reached the coffee and “ wine of the house ” stage ; “ it’s too early for the Haussmann yet—too early for me, at least. What say to slipping into the Casino for an hour ? ”

“ Anything you like,” agreed Chipstead, signalling for the bill.

“ That’s a rather dandy cane, Bunny,” said Boyne, as they sauntered out into the crowded Madeleine.

“ Glad you like it,” replied Chipstead briefly.

A couple of hours were spent agreeably enough at the famous music-hall, and then Tommy Boyne decided for fiercer entertainment. An adjournment was accordingly made to the palatial gambling-club at the corner of the Boulevard des Italiens and the Rue de la Michodière.

“ Will there be any difficulty in getting in ? ” asked Bunny, as they arrived outside.

“ None whatever. Henri, the manager, knows me. I’ll introduce you ; then everything will be O.K.”

Soon Chipstead was talking to an immaculately-dressed man with oriental-looking eyes and the inscrutable face peculiar to all professional gamblers.

“ This is a very great friend of mine, Henri,” said the comedian ; “ he wants to come in and have a little gamble to-night.”

“ *Mais, certainement.* You are very welcome, M’sieur.” The manager’s demeanour betokened a host receiving an honoured guest. The Frenchman still has the most agreeable manners of any nation on earth.

The two friends passed through into the gambling-rooms, after leaving their coats, hats and sticks at a cloak-room.

“ Some of the heaviest gambling in the world can be seen here on a ‘big’ night,” declared the comedian ; “ but then Henri is a king among the gamblers ; he is a very important figure indeed ; he is connected with the Deauville Casino, started this place himself and is said to be enormously wealthy. This is the baccarat room.”

The sight, of course, was no novelty to that sophisticated man of the world, Bunny Chipstead. Bunny had made no comment beyond a non-committal “ H’m,” whilst Boyne had been delivering his information.

To anyone apart from the habitual gambler and the student of human nature, the spectacle was not particularly pleasing. To Bunny this was only Cannes and Deauville over again—there were exactly the same types—Greeks, Russians, Levantines, foreigners of many mixed breeds—their faces emotionless ; there was the same ceaseless counting of 1000-franc notes by

be-jewelled fingers—some long and claw-like, others fat and stubby.

So familiar was the scene that he even knew some of these men by sight—he had seen them doing exactly the same thing in other places. Gambling with them was not only a life-work, but an obsession ; they existed for nothing else. It was not for the things which money could provide that they cared—the æsthetic joys of a beautiful home, the pleasure of collecting valuable pictures or other works of art—this meant nothing to them. Money to these men was merely so many counters with which to gamble.

He turned away from watching the table at which there was “no limit,” and at which the counters, made curiously enough of iron, represented no fewer than 10,000 francs each. As he did so, his body stiffened. Walking across the floor, accompanied by a youngster dressed so beautifully that he decided he must be either an actor or a young millionaire exquisite, was the man he knew as “Pearson” —the man who had had the audacity to call on him in London with that obviously faked story and who had escaped so dexterously from the Riviera train three days before.

At the same instant, and whilst he turned so that he might not be recognised, Tommy Boyne made an exclamation.

“Well, I’m damned ! Fancy meeting Harry Upton here !” Chipstead noticed his eyes

were on the immaculately-dressed youngster (he would be about twenty-four, not more, he supposed) whom "Pearson" had in tow.

He caught Boyne's arm.

"Look here, Tommy," he said, dragging the comedian away into a recess, "I want you to do me a favour."

"Of course, old boy—but what's fretting you?"

"You see those two fellows?" motioning towards the backs of the retreating couple.

"I not only see 'em, but I know one of 'em," replied Boyne. "Didn't you hear me make the remark? The youngster is Harry Upton, in my opinion the best *jeune premier* on Broadway. I haven't seen him for a couple of years. When I get the chance I'm going to ask him what he's doing these days. He looks flourishing."

"The favour I want you to do is to ask him—discreetly, of course—who his companion is—what name the man calls himself—where he met him and why he is with him. You needn't look startled, Tommy—I have the best of reasons for wanting to know."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," was the instant reply, "but what's the idea? Is the fellow a crook?"

"To the best of my belief he is, but I want to make sure. That is why I ask you to approach your actor friend and get all the information you possibly can. Meanwhile, I'll

be hanging round waiting for you. Sorry to postpone your poker game."

"That's all right. Of course, if that cove is a crook I must warn Harry for his own sake."

"Be discreet," warned Chipstead.

"Leave it to me," was the reply.

Sitting down and ordering a drink, Bunny endeavoured to come to a decision. He had two moves open to him. The first was to ring up Fouquières and explain the situation to him. This would probably result in "Pearson" being tactfully detained on suspicion of being a crook (things like that can happen in France as he well knew); the second was to hold his hand for the present and to act on the information which Boyne brought back. This seemed much the better plan, for, however strong his suspicions might be, he remembered that he had no direct evidence against the man. The mere fact that he had falsely represented himself to be a London business man would not cut much ice in France unless Fouquières could bring further charges against him.

Half an hour went by. The last thing Bunny wanted to happen was for "Pearson" to recognise him, and so he remained where he was, his anxiety increasing every minute.

Boyne did not return alone. The young American actor was with him.

Before an introduction could be made, Chipstead asked a question.

“Where’s he gone?—the man you were with?”

The actor’s face expressed the astonishment he felt.

“He’s coming back in half an hour. Just as we were about to sit down at the fifty-louis table, one of the attendants said he was wanted on the telephone. He went off and then came to apologise and say that he had to fly back to the hotel to meet someone who had unexpectedly arrived by the ten o’clock train from London. Would I excuse him?—he would certainly be back within half an hour. Meanwhile, I was on no account to leave the club. But this is rather a tall story of yours, Mr.—”

“Chipstead,” supplied the man he addressed; “and if you will excuse my saying so, it’s not nearly as tall as the one this man probably told you. It’s my principal business in life to know a crook when I meet one, and, as a matter of fact, a few days ago in London I actually found this particular specimen out in a bare-faced lie. He was then masquerading as a wholesale chemist called Pearson.”

“But that’s the very name he gave me!” returned the actor; “wait a minute—I have his card. As you happen to be a particular pal of Tommy Boyne’s, I’m willing to take your word for it that the fellow’s a crook, Mr. Chipstead, but, darn it all, it’s pretty hard to swallow all the same. How do you know he was masquerading, as you call it?”

“ Because I made it my business to find out. I had a particular reason for wishing to know why this man, a complete stranger, should call at my rooms in London. Ten minutes after I had practically ordered him out, I discovered that the business magnate he was impersonating was actually in the States on a business trip. What do you say to that ? ”

“ Why, that it's the most amazing thing I have ever heard in my life ! Look here, this is what happened : I came over from New York in one of the French boats—a beauty ; had a wonderful trip—and put up at the Continental. I had been playing for fifteen months in ‘ The Lovely Lady ’ and felt I owed myself a good time and a bit of a holiday. At the hotel I ran into this fellow—literally, as a matter of fact. Mutual apologies followed ; and then drinks. He seemed a friendly sort of guy and volunteered the information that he was over from London for a bit of a break, as he called it——”

“ He said his name was Pearson ? ” interrupted Bunny.

“ Oh, yes. Why, here's his card. I didn't have much to do with him, except chat in the hotel, until to-night. He then asked me to dinner at Maxim's and afterwards volunteered to bring me to this club of which he said he was a member. That's all I know.”

“ Thanks very much,” said Chipstead ; “ you've helped me quite a lot.” He turned to

Boyne. "Wait while I telephone, will you?"

The comedian smiled.

"Push on with it! Chipstead," he explained to Upton, "has the telephone complex. Just when you are beginning to feel you can tolerate him, he breaks the conversation down by rushing off to the telephone."

"I say, this chap may be a crook, but I shouldn't like to feel that I had split on him behind his back," expostulated the young actor; "you're not going to ring up the police, are you?"

"Certainly not," Chipstead said reassuringly. "I'm merely going to put through a call to a pal of mine. If the gentleman we have been discussing should return whilst I am away—a very unlikely event, in my opinion—just carry on as though nothing had happened. Don't refer to this talk, of course, and don't point me out to him—that would make him very shy indeed. One last word, Mr. Upton: don't let him play you for a sucker."

"Well, I'm damned!" exploded the Broadway limelight hero; "what do you think I am—a fool?"

"No, but 'Pearson' is dangerous. Whether you can be too careful with a man of that description, I leave to your discretion."



ONCE again he had drawn blank. "Pearson" had not returned to the Club. The probability was that the man had recognised him and had gone into hiding. But as the result of his recent telephone message, Fouquières' men were now watching the hotel at which he was staying. That might or might not have some results.

At two o'clock, Boyne admitted that he had had enough. He was about forty pounds down at his poker-game and that was sufficient for him in one evening. The young Broadway actor was still playing baccarat—and winning. "I'm going to see the night out," he told Boyne; "run round about noon and have lunch with me."

The night was fine but dark, there being no moon.

"If you're not in a hurry, I'll walk part of the way with you," volunteered Chipstead.

"Righto!" replied the comedian; "I'm staying at the Balzan."

"Well, that simplifies matters; we both go the same way. My flat is only about a quarter of a mile from your hotel."

They turned into the Boulevard des Capucines, and then into the Rue Royale. Beyond them stretched the vast gulf of gloom, only faintly

lit at this time of the morning, which was the Place de la Concorde.

The only sound for a few minutes was that made by their footsteps on the deserted pavement.

"I hear funny stories about you, Bunny," remarked the comedian; "and this affair to-night confirms them."

"Aren't I respectable enough for you to know?"

"Mutt! No, I mean your knowledge of crooks and that sort of thing. With all your money, why in the devil do you want to go messing about with crime?"

"You should have a long serious talk with my sister, Tommy; she shares your views. But every man must have a hobby—in your lighter moments you choose talking like a bit of decayed Debrett. I find chasing crooks gives me an interest."

"H'm! Well, everyone to his taste, of course. But I think too much of my skin to—hullo! Bunny, what do those fellows want?" Boyne pointed to a couple of slinking figures which had crossed the road ahead. "What are they, Apaches? Do they intend to cut us off?"

"If they do, we must fight—that's all!"

"Fight!" returned the comedian; "but, that's all very fine! We've nothing but our fists—at least, I haven't—and these beauties

use knives, don't they? I wish we'd taken a taxi."

"Don't get chilblains!" adjured Chipstead; "come along—they appear to be waiting for us." Bunny's voice was tense, and it held a queerish lilt as though the owner was looking forward with some sort of anticipatory relish to what was ahead. He caught the comedian's arm. "It's curious," he said, "but I can't seem to help collecting crooks."

"Curious?" echoed Boyne; "it's a ghastly habit if you ask me."

They were now almost parallel with the British Embassy—Bunny smiled when he noticed the fact. The two men, who were dressed in shabby clothes, made no movement as they passed, but went on talking.

Bunny and his companion had gone another dozen yards or so, when he suddenly turned. A grim smile was playing round the corners of his mouth.

"Behind me, Tommy—quick!" he commanded. The two men, whom he had left jabbering amicably together a few seconds before were now only a yard or so away. They must have covered the short intervening distance at a run. Their manner was different. What little could be seen of their faces beneath the huge-peaked caps that both wore was distinctly unpleasant; and, moreover, in the right hand of each was a long-bladed knife.

"Oh!" gasped Tommy Boyne.

"Behind me, you fool!" ordered Chipstead again. By this time he had done something with the cane he had been carrying—something which brought a long line of steel with a wickedly efficient point at the end of it out of the wooden scabbard; if these thugs had their knives, Bunny had his sword-stick, a relic of the romantic past, but capable of doing quite good service in this unromantic present.

He did not wait for the attack—he carried the fight to the enemy. He was on them before they could determine on their campaign.

A squeal, partly of terror, partly of rage, announced that one had been "pinked," the sword-stick drawing blood from a wound in the right shoulder. The other took the chance to leap, but he was arrested in mid-air, for Tommy Boyne, discontented with his watching brief, had slipped from behind Chipstead, and, sensing the other's intention, had dived for his legs. The two went down in a heap. But Boyne was uppermost.

"Good work, Tommy!" cried Bunny—"now jump clear!"

But the comedian was loath to obey. Like many peace-loving individuals, once he had over-stepped the border-line, he was out for blood. He caught the fellow's neck and started to do his best to throttle him.

In the meantime, Bunny started after the

second customer. But the latter, with the blood oozing from that wound in his shoulder, had lost his original ardour; when he saw the sword-stick flashing again, he took to his heels and vanished into the darkness.

Chipstead made no attempt to follow him. They had one capture.

"Get him on his feet—but be careful of the knife," he said to Boyne; "here, I'll lend a hand." Replacing the blade, he caught hold of the man's right shoulder and with Boyne's help, hauled him up.

"You've done magnificently, Tommy," he told the comedian; "and now, if you aren't too tired and bored, I want you to help me get this fellow back to my flat. There are quite a lot of questions I intend to ask him."

"Righto!" replied the comedian.

With his manacled wrists held before him, the man faced his captor.

Bunny Chipstead poured out a stiff whisky-and-soda and held it to his prisoner's lips. The man drank greedily. As Bunny studied the other's features, he recalled something with startling intensity.

"Have you a brother?" he asked. This man bore an uncanny resemblance to the unknown who had brought him the cipher-packet and who had paid for the deed with his life.

The prisoner gulped.

“ Yes, I have a brother,” he replied ; “ but what’s it to do with you ? ”

Bunny disregarded the question.

“ Had your brother a small wart on the left side of his nose ? ”

“ Yes, but once more, what has it to do with you ? ”

“ It has something to do with you, I am thinking.”

“ Why ? ” The other was stirred. Bunny, regarding him closely, decided that at one time this man might have been a gentleman.

“ Because if he’s the same man as I have in mind, your brother is dead—murdered by order of the very person whose orders you were endeavouring to carry out to-night.”

“ Murdered—Jacob . . . ! Tell me everything you know ! . . . I implore you ! ”

“ I’ll make a bargain with you,” was the reply ; “ if you agree to give me confidence for confidence—well, then, I’ll talk. But not otherwise.”

“ What is it you wish to know ? ” gasped the man. His face was white and drawn.

“ Who was it instructed you and the other man to murder me to-night ? Was it The Disguiser ? ”

A spasm of terror convulsed the other’s face.

“ Yes,” he replied in a whisper.

“ For what purpose ? ”

“ He wanted some papers which he thought

you might be carrying. Besides, you were in his way. We followed you from the Haussmann Club."

"Is The Disguiser now in Paris?"

"I cannot tell you that; we never know where he is—the orders come through someone else."

The interrogatory continued.

"Do you know the man who calls himself 'Pearson'? The man who was at the Haussmann Club to-night?"

"He is the man who gives the orders."

"The Disguiser has Headquarters in Paris?"

"Yes—but, my God! you must not ask me to say where they are. I'm afraid—*afraid*—I tell you!"

His questioner nodded.

"I can understand you being afraid of your brother's murderer," he said.

The man held up his manacled wrists.

"Tell me!" he pleaded.

"When you have given me the address of The Disguiser's Headquarters—not before."

"No!—damn you, don't torture me! I can't tell you! I——" The voice trailed off. Silenced followed; he had fainted.

Bunny unlocked the handcuffs and started restorative methods. Within five minutes the man had come round.

"Are you strong enough to hear what happened to your brother? Do you feel up

to it? Don't trouble to talk for a minute or so; just nod."

The man inclined his head.

"A week or so ago, a man, a complete stranger, burst into my rooms in London. He insisted upon seeing me. When we stood face to face he asked me my name—and I was forced to call my butler in order that my identity should be fully established. After he was satisfied, this man, who bore an extraordinary facial resemblance to you, handed me a packet containing papers. He said he had procured them at the risk of his life and had brought them to me for safe keeping."

"Why to you? Who are you?"

"I am by way of being a detective. The other question I am unable to answer. No doubt your brother had his reason.

"Naturally, I tried to question him, but he was like a man terrified out of his life. He would not stay, but promised if I would give him another twenty-four hours, during which time he proposed to make certain investigations, he would tell me the whole story. He made an appointment for me to meet him in Hyde Park the following evening. When I arrived at the spot, I found a dead man sitting on the seat—your brother had been stabbed through the heart. You are in the best position for knowing if the man for whom you work ordered his destruction."

A groan came from the listener.



“M’sieur,” he said; “I will fill in some of the blanks. The man who came to you—why I do not know—was my brother; it must have been my brother; no other two men in the world could be so much alike as he and I. We are twins, our name is Larouche and we come from Geneva.

“Early in life my brother Jacob wished to be a detective. He made my father first smile and then become angry. But in the end he had his way; he became a crime investigator.

“Have you ever pondered on the irony of Life, M’sieur? Consider the present case; whilst my brother Jacob rose to be a detective, I—sunk to be a criminal! I was a bank-clerk—and a secret gambler. Forgery was my downfall. When discovered, I was sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment. But I never served that term; the person who had resolved to make use of me saw to that. By a masterpiece of audacious planning I was taken out of my prison-cell——”

“By the man who calls himself The Disguiser?”

“By his orders. But I have said enough, M’sieur; I am tired . . .” He put up a hand to his lips . . .

A few seconds later, Chipstead sprang forward. The man’s face was ghastly; his body was racked with agony.

“Poison,” whispered Larouche—and fell back dead.

FOR a few moments Chipstead blamed himself for the tragedy. Then he shook his mind free of the charge. If the death of this man was to be laid at the door of anyone, The Disguiser was responsible.

But why had Larouche suddenly decided to take his life? Bunny imagined he knew: it must have been because he considered himself in some way the cause of the death of his brother. Jacob Larouche, he must have felt, was murdered through his instrumentality.

If only the man had lived a little longer. That Larouche knew the vital secret, the information which could have led him to the lair of the Disguiser, Bunny was convinced. But rather than betray the man through whose influence he had become a rat of the underworld, he chose Death. Fear of his employer had united fiercely with reproach.

Whilst he was wondering what he could do with the corpse, the telephone rang.

"Is it you, Chipstead?" called an excited voice. "I am at my flat and Dupresne is with me. I wish you to come along without delay!"

"At this time of the morning?"

"*Certainement.* I have news of the utmost importance. My friend, I urge you not to delay."

“ Oh, all right.”

Carefully locking the sitting-room door, and putting the key into his pocket, Bunny walked quickly down the stairs and into the street. Signalling a prowling taxi, he stepped ten minutes later into the rooms of the Chief of Secret Police.

M. Fouquières was in the wildest state of excitement.

“ Congratulate me, *mon ami*; we have succeeded. I knew Dupresne would not fail us; he has solved the cipher! Smoke a cigarette—I will have him in.”

When the cipher-expert appeared from another room he looked as though he had not slept for weeks. He was unshaved, his hair had not been brushed, his clothes were incredibly untidy. But the eyes behind the precarious *pince-nez* gleamed like a conqueror's.

“ Monsieur,” he said with Napoleonic simplicity, “ I have accomplished what I promised. The cipher has yielded up its secrets.”

“ Splendid! I congratulate you, M. Dupresne,” replied Chipstead. This little, paunchy man must be a wizard at his job.

He was desperately anxious to know what the packet contained, but the solver was not to be thrown off his hobby-horse; M. Dupresne was off in full cry.

“ The lexicon system of writing ciphers—

of which the packet handed to me was a very efficient example—pre-supposes the existence of a similar dictionary in the possession of each correspondent. Gross, in his monumental work on Criminal Investigation, points this out very clearly. In such dictionaries, the pages are usually printed in double columns. In writing the cipher each word first of all is looked up in the dictionary, but, instead of the word found being used, *the word in the same line of the same page but in the neighbouring column is taken.*

“Now, Messieurs, once having obtained possession of this fact, all that I had need to do, you would say, of course, was to discover the dictionary. But I need scarcely inform you that in this case no dictionary was forthcoming.

“But I was not beaten—I could not, I dared not be beaten! In my office I had two dozen dictionaries recognised to be used by criminals. I had to try them all, and all but one proved useless. With the twenty-fourth I was more fortunate. Even then, if, after Gross and one other, I had not been the foremost authority in the world, I should not have entirely succeeded. As it is, however, I have been able to unravel all these dark mysteries.”

“Good man!” remarked Bunny, with a glance at the Paris Police Chief; “and now I should rather like to hear what they are.”

Fouquières took his turn to burst into speech.

"You remember I told you I was perturbed by a problem, *mon cher* Chipstead?"

"Yes. Some master-forgery was at work, didn't you say, flooding the world with false French, American, English and Venezuelan bank-notes. Well?"

"Well!" echoed Fouquières, rising and thumping the palm of his left hand with his right clenched fist in his excitement; "this document," snatching a number of typed pages from the willing grasp of Dupresne, the cipher-solver, "is an exposure of the complete organisation—the number of false notes issued, where they are sent, how they are to be distributed—everything! It is a complete guide issued apparently to the leading members of the gang. *Mon vieux*, I am the happiest man in the world."

"With one exception!" came a spirited expostulation.

"Ah, I forget you, Dupresne. You must have the prior claim, of course."

"And now I will contribute," remarked Chipstead.

Fouquières looked at his visitor.

"Explain yourself, *mon ami*."

"The last time I saw you, Fouquières, you remarked that perhaps I should not be allowed to get back to England. You remember I scoffed at the suggestion."

“ You did. But that was your courageous spirit——”

“ It wasn't; it was merely my temper. Well, *maître*, you were right; an attempt has already been made on my life.”

“ *Mon Dieu!* But where? When? ”

“ To-night—or rather this morning—in the Place de la Concorde. I had been with a friend to the Haussmann Club and, when leaving, we were followed. Two men sprang on us with knives. My pal developed a surprising spirit of pugnacity and almost croaked one of the men whilst I attended to the other. As it happened I was carrying a sword-stick——”

“ It is the romantic temperament that you possess, my dear Chipstead; you return, another d'Artagnan, to set Paris humming with your prowess.”

“ Just as you like,” was the crisp comment; “ but this isn't the first time I've found a sword-stick come in useful. I pinked my man in the arm, and he vanished. I thought I'd take the other one home and see if I couldn't get something out of him.” Bunny broke off: “ I'll give you three guesses who this man proved to be.”

The Police Chief made a gesture which would have reminded a previous generation of that flamboyant actor-genius, Beerbohm Tree.

“ Not the man with the wart? Tell me! ” he almost screamed.

“ You forget the man with the wart is unfortunately dead.”

“ *Mon Dieu!* What am I saying? I mean someone connected with that dead one? ”

“ The man I took back to my flat an hour ago was his brother—and now he, too, is dead.”

“ Dead! But did you kill him? ”

“ He killed himself. After admitting he was in the employ of The Disguiser, *who had made him a forger*: don't forget that, Fouquières, he took a tablet of poison from his pocket and was dead almost instantaneously. I should rather like to know what I am to do with the corpse.”

Fouquières waved a hand.

“ Dupresne——”

A shrill cry of protest broke from the cipher expert.

“ *Non!* I am not an undertaker! ”

“ Quiet, little one . . . but I will see to that.” Turning again to Chipstead: “ You see that I was correct, *mon ami*; we each had a problem, and each has helped the other to the solution. *Voilà!* The Disguiser is not only the kidnapper of Sir Robert Heddingly, but he is also connected with my gang of forgers.”

“ Probably the head,” agreed Bunny; “ that accounts, perhaps, for his lying low for so long. He was flooding the world with spurious money. Do you know what I think, *maître?* ”

“I prepare myself to be dazzled by brilliance,” replied Fouquières very seriously.

“I have told you that the man who poisoned himself in my flat declared himself to be the brother of the unknown who handed me this cipher in London and whom subsequently I found murdered in Hyde Park. It appears that they were twins (which probably accounts for the extraordinary likeness), and whilst Jacob—the one who dropped in on me in London—decided to be a detective, the other went into a bank. Oh, I forgot to add that they were Swiss and that their home town was Geneva. It was ironical that one should go chasing the other, but so well as I can reckon it up it strikes me that the crook either lost his copy of the firm’s instructions which M. Dupresne has so cleverly deciphered, and that this was found by his detective brother or that the latter obtained it by threat or some other violent means. It was when he realised after what I told him to-night that his brother had been murdered because of this that the man committed suicide.”

“No doubt you are right, my friend—but our concern is with the living and not with the dead. You have to find Sir Robert Heddingly whilst I have to find The Disguiser.”

“You appear to forget that I also have a slight interest in that gentleman. And it seems to me that before we can hope to find him we have to know where he can be found.



I was hoping to get that out of Larouche, but he killed himself before I had the chance. In any case I don't think he would have betrayed the brute—like the rest, he appeared too afraid." He became mildly sarcastic. "I don't suppose you happen to have the address of this gang's headquarters?"

Fouquières roared with laughter.

"*Ma foi!* But, of course! And we are going there! You and I, *mon ami*—not Dupresne; his stomach prevents him being a fighter."

"And my common-sense," commented the cipher-solver shuddering.

### CHAPTER XXIII      SUSAN MEETS A CLERGYMAN

ONCE again Susan was sitting on her favourite seat overlooking the beautiful Bournemouth bay. There was a distinct nip in the air, but, wrapped in her fur coat, she was snug and warm.

When she first concentrated her thoughts, she wondered vaguely why Matthews had not telephoned her at the hotel as usual that morning. If he had become tired of making

the inquiry, she was entirely to blame because she really had been very rude to him the other day. The man had been solely concerned for her safety, she realised now, but . . . well, she had been in a frightfully bad mood at the time.

Looking back, she felt ashamed of herself! What a pig she had been to harbour those thoughts of Bunny! How disgusting! How childish! She deserved a slapping.

But, then, in the meantime, two letters had arrived, both bearing the Paris postmark. The signature at the end of each was "Bunny." They were not very long, and, regarded purely as love-letters, neither would have carried off a gold medal, but to her they were satisfying. A few days' separation had taught Susan a good deal: she had learned, for instance, that a word from Bunny Chipstead meant, and would always mean more to her than a whole volume from any other man. Bunny was not the demonstrative type: he would never rave and tear his hair. A pressure of the hand, a reassuring smile—how she missed that smile!—would convey all that she wanted to know.

Bunny had stated, in effect, that so far he had met with very little success. Something told him, however, that he must stay in Paris for a while, but that he was looking forward eagerly to being able to return with some news of her father. In the meantime, she must take

great care of herself, and he was "her devoted Bunny."

She reproached herself bitterly for her previous ingratitude as she re-read the second letter which had arrived that morning. It was for her sake that Chipstead had gone to Paris. Although he would have preferred to stay with her—didn't he admit as much in this letter?—he had sacrificed his own desire. Of course, his sister being ill had been a reason, but he was staying on in Paris because he believed that he would obtain there some clue that would lead to the solving of this horrible mystery.

But they must do something this end—Matthews and she. There was that fisherman at Sandbanks. Somehow or other she had not believed in him. For some unaccountable reason his story had not impressed her. That was why she had not worried unduly about her father's hat being found. With Matthews out of the way, she would start an investigation on her own.

The weather had changed. The sky was now overcast and rain commenced to fall in a slight drizzle. It was bitterly cold, moreover.

The sight of the green 'bus careering along the sea-front brought a longing to return to Bournemouth and the comfort of the hotel. There would be a glorious fire in the lounge;

she would be in time for tea . . . toast with plenty of butter, and lovely hot tea . . . that nice, attentive waiter, with the rather fascinating smile, would have reserved her the little table by the fire . . .

It was terribly tempting, but she thrust the longing away. With Bunny possibly risking his life in Paris, surely it was up to her to try to do *something*. She didn't quite know what questions she would ask the fisherman even if she met him—she hadn't been able to work out any definite plan because nothing was at all tangible—but she was going to find that cottage. The thought drew her like a magnet. Her instinct might prove deceptive, but she felt that cottage had a secret which she ought to know.

Turning her back resolutely on the main road and the now receding motor 'bus, she set off in the direction decided upon. Although this was an entirely strange district to her, and although the previous journey had been made in the darkness, Susan possessed a good bump of locality, and at the end of ten minutes' wandering over the sand-dunes, she stopped.

This was the cottage, she was convinced. For one thing, she remembered its isolated position and for another, everything about it was so tumble-down and ramshackle.

By this time the rain was falling in a steady downpour. Excited at the thought of what

might await her at the journey's end, she had not troubled about the weather, but now her soaked shoes were evidence enough: her stockings must be wringing wet.

She stood, hesitating, for a moment. Her feeling that there was something behind that dilapidated door which concerned her became strengthened, but, with a hand outstretched to knock, she paused. What excuse could she give supposing the man was inside? And supposing he wasn't, wouldn't she be trespassing?

The rain decided her. It would be her excuse. She had lost her way and desired shelter. That was reasonable enough.

She knocked.

There was no answer, and she rapped with her knuckles a second time. Then, there still being silence, she tried pushing the door. It yielded. Warning herself not to be a funk, Susan stepped inside.

The place was empty. At least, there was no one in what passed for a living-room. Beyond that she did not care to look.

The fisherman had evidently ceased occupation, for what few articles of furniture this room had boasted on the night she had been there with Chipstead and Matthews were gone. All that remained was a lop-sided stool, and, because for the moment she felt overwhelmingly tired, she drew this to her and sat down.

The desolation of everything made her shiver. Outside the rain, and inside—what was this intangible but intense sense of foreboding? The room was empty, but the feeling that an unseen horror was near at hand persisted.

After another minute had passed, she got upon her feet. It was impossible to sit there passively waiting . . . she must busy herself. Hadn't she come there to have a look round, to investigate?

The room was becoming darker; it had already been gloomy when she entered. And there was, after all, nothing to see; what a fool she had been to imagine that she would hit upon any discovery there. Why, apart from the stool and that rusty bucket by the side of the filthy fireplace, there was nothing in the room.

Yet she drew near the bucket and stooped over it. Moved by a force which she could not understand, she carried the thing over to the window.

Then she cried out. She knew she had been right. Fate had guided her here.

From out of the bucket she drew the fragments of a pair of spectacles. These were in two pieces. A severance had been made at the nose-piece. But she remembered those spectacles; it was the pair which the fisherman who blinked had worn the night he told his story. She had noticed then how thick the

lenses were, and had thought, before the man had mentioned the fact, how short-sighted he must be to require to wear such strong-powered glasses.

*And now he had thrown them away . . .*

Susan's mind went delving into the past. A memory flashed through her brain. It was of Florence Wainwright, a girl who had gone to the same school in Hertfordshire. Florence had been rather the butt of the form: a stupid little rhyme commencing—

*Flo, Flo, mind how you go—*

Poor Flo! How short-sighted she had been; without her glasses, it was often said, she was as blind as a bat. That day when she fell down and broke both lenses, she had to be led about. After that, she always carried a spare pair.

The memory remained fresh. Susan recalled how one day she induced Florence to allow her to take a peep through her glasses. It was an unforgettable experience; to begin with she felt that her eyes were being drawn out of her head, and then followed an alarming attack of dizziness. She had never wanted to look through Flo's glasses again.

Not quite realising what she was doing, and still dwelling in the past, Susan raised one of the lenses she held to her right eye. Expecting to live through again the sensation of several years before, she found herself looking with comfort. Gradually the conviction came that

the spectacles she had discovered were not composed of optical lenses at all; they were merely plain glass.

*Then they were clever fakes!*

The words almost bursting from her lips, she turned away from the window in time to see the door slowly open.

Instantly she was on her guard. If this was the fisherman—and who else could it be?—he would want to know what she was doing there. The rain? Yes, she could say that, but would he believe her? She knew now that the man was a fraud, a liar, an enemy—and, recognising her, he would act as such.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What weather to be sure!”

Susan's nerves cracked. A hysterical laugh rose bubbling within her and had to find vent.

“Dreadful, isn't it?” she replied.

The portly-figured, pleasant-faced clergyman of late middle-age, who had materialised through the door in the place of the fisherman she expected, viewed her with a sort of benign astonishment.

“Dear me!” he exclaimed, “I had no idea there was any one here. I came in to shelter out of the rain. I imagined that this house—er—cottage was uninhabited. Really, I beg your pardon.”

“Please don't apologise,” replied Susan, feeling herself getting under control; “I am



just as much a trespasser as yourself, if it comes to that. Like you, I am sheltering here out of the rain. So far as I know, this cottage *is* deserted; there are not very many signs of occupation, are there? And no one could blame us for entering, could they?" She was still trembling

"Dear me, no! The owner—if there is an owner—would surely be most unreasonable to raise any objection. In any case I trust your sex and my cloth would prevent him being offensive. As we have met under such unconventional circumstances—not that convention is very strictly regarded nowadays, I am afraid—may I not introduce myself? I am the Rev. Ambrose Paignton, Vicar of Little Bampton, Hunts."

"And my name is Susan Courtenay." What a dear old thing he was! Fear vanished.

"Visiting Bournemouth like myself, Miss Courtenay?"

"Yes—in a way." She hurried on to attempt to cover her confusion. "Do you happen to know how often the 'buses run back to Bournemouth? Rain or no rain, I must be getting back."

"And so must I. My niece will be anxious. What a wretched day it has turned out, to be sure. Nothing but disappointment. First of all I find that my old parishioner I had hoped to meet was dead, and now this rain . . . But you were asking about the 'buses. I under-

stood from the conductor whom I asked on the journey out that they run every half-hour. Let me see . . . ” He pulled out his watch. “How quickly it gets dark now, to be sure. I cannot see very well.” The speaker moved to get the light from the window and then approached the girl.

“Your eyes are younger than mine, my dear young lady; would you mind looking at my watch?”

Susan was wearing her own wristlet-watch, but the Reverend Ambrose Paignton’s demeanour was so charmingly deferential that she bent her head.

“It is ten minutes to four,” she said.

“Ten minutes to four. Then we shall just have time. Allow me to escort you, Miss Courtenay.”

She felt a hand lightly touch her arm and turned to smile at the speaker.

The smile died instantly. She felt a wave of horror pass down her spine. The clergyman was looking intently at her and his face now was not that of a courteous, kindly-disposed priest of God, but of a fiend.

The eyes seemed to be looking straight into her mind. They were cold, hard, devilish. They held her in a fascinated state of horror, so that resistance became impossible. She tried to break away, to turn to rush towards the door, but the hand on her arm now tightened.

"I shall have great pleasure in escorting you," she heard the man say. By this time she was in a sort of stupor, and her state of bewilderment was increased by feeling something sharp, like the prick of a needle, entering the flesh of her arm.

Now the conviction that she was in the greatest danger crowded upon her. She tried again to struggle, but gradually the drowsiness became overpowering and she sank beneath it.

The last recollection she had was of recoiling from those hard, callous eyes.

## CHAPTER XXIV

## THE CHATEAU OF SHAME

AT the cross-roads where the country took a sudden dip downwards, Fouquières signalled his driver to stop.

"We are getting near, my friend," he said to Chipstead. His strong, eager, anticipatory voice was in curious contrast to the melancholy moaning of the wind as it came screeching across the adjacent wastes.

"We may draw a blank—have our journey for nothing." Bunny was chilled in mind as well as body. Ever since he had taken up this affair, he felt he had been chasing phantoms ;

and now, with his spirits at low ebb, this early morning raid took on an almost ridiculous aspect. Might it not be all a fake? Were they, like so many simpletons, walking into a trap that had been baited very ingeniously for them?

Fouquières, puffing at a cigar of almost ferocious strength, gave a low, chuckling laugh.

"You are like the professional boxer just before he enters the ring. You are *distract* . . . but wait until the gong sounds . . . Ah, then! For myself, I would not miss this for anything."

"Even though you may be killed." It was impossible to shake off his gloom. So many things had gone wrong. Even the special men Fouquières had instructed to watch the Continental Hotel where "Pearson" had been staying, according to the young American actor, Upton, had brought back no news. The man had not returned to the hotel.

Then he was worried about Susan. Had his letters miscarried or what was the reason she had not written?

The Chief of Police by his side was continuing to talk.

"We have ten men besides ourselves; it should be enough. As I have already told you, this fastness of our friends is a derelict château. It has been uninhabited for upwards of a hundred years. A fiendish triple murder

was committed there by its last occupant, the Marquis de Malvail, who was the end of his line, and since then the house has been shunned. No one would buy or even rent it—The Disguiser, if it is he whom we are to meet to-night, has made an admirable choice. Another half-a-mile and we shall be there.”

The car in which the speaker and Chipstead were riding and which led the way—the other two cars followed at distances of two hundred yards between each—plunged now into a sea of blackness. An impenetrable gloom closed them in on every side, and the shifting shadows caused by the car’s head-lights strengthened the impression that they were crossing the threshold into a world unreal and bizarre.

“*Ma foi*, but a good setting for crime!” exclaimed Fouquières. He spoke with relish, as a connoisseur delighted with a “find.”

“Is the place near here, then?” asked Chipstead. He mentally agreed with his companion that the scene was appropriate enough, but his present mood made him hate the darkness.

“It is there,” replied Fouquières, with dramatic effect: “The Château of Shame.” The car had now left the heart of the wood through which they had penetrated and had come to a great open space. This was dominated by a gaunt, unkempt, disordered mass of masonry that, in the uncertain light, looked as squalid as its designation.

“The Château of Shame,” repeated Bunny; “well, it looks like it.”

Fouquières made no answer; he was too busy. He had ordered his driver to stop, and leave the car in the shadows. Soon the other cars drew up silently and the detectives they carried stepped out. Casting an eye over them, Chipstead liked their demeanour. They held themselves well and looked hard-bitten. But, then, the very fact that they worked under Fouquières was evidence enough of their general ability.

The Police Chief addressed them briefly.

“Once inside—and Monsieur Chipstead and I will guarantee to get you inside—you know what to do,” he said. “If the rats are there, as I expect, you will hunt them. And do not be too merciful. For these are rats who carry poison in their jaws; if they bite you they will kill.” Almost offensively melodramatic Chipstead decided the words were; he wished Fouquières wouldn’t be such an ass. He yawned; he was wearied almost beyond expression. When in the hell was something going to happen?

Fouquières led the way forward. He stopped outside a huge door set in an immensely thick wall which stood at least ten feet high.

“Who is the best climber?” he asked. “Someone must get over the wall and open this door, which of course is locked. It will save us much time—and time is valuable. We

should have brought a telescopic ladder. The top of the wall may be protected."

He broke off his remarks. One of his listeners had evidently become impatient for he left the crowd.

Halting about a dozen yards from the wall, Chipstead commenced to run forward. His hands glinted.

"He has the gloves of steel," Fouquières told himself, quietly chuckling; "now watch."

He, like the others, saw the British Secret Service man leap upwards. He rose in the air as though some hidden force was propelling him. The hands, which carried a pale gleam, as though they were washed by moonlight, gripped the top of the ten-foot wall—gripped and held.

For a moment or so the figure of the man who had done such a surprising athletic feat, hung as though the hands had been impaled, and then slowly it was drawn up. A few moments later was heard a faint crash.

Chipstead had been the first to enter the Château of Shame . . .

"He jumps like a stag," said the Police Chief. Fouquières knew a good deal concerning Chipstead, but he did not know—how could he?—that Bunny had been a world-crack over the hurdles in his youth.

He waited expectantly outside the huge door. There was a creaking of bolts, a loud

click—and it swung backwards. Beyond was a gloom that might have come from the nethermost pit.

“The place is a wilderness; if this is a hoax, we shall look pretty fools,” said the man who held the door.

It seemed that nothing could shatter Fouquières' imperturbability.

“This lock,” he said; “you have noticed how well-oiled it is. The bolts, too, are they rusty? You see they are not. My friend, the gong has sounded and you have already leapt into the ring.”

“Oh, no,” was the reply; “we have to negotiate that yet,” and he pointed to the dark, sullen-shaped building a couple of hundred yards ahead. “No lights must be shown, Fouquières; give the orders; they may be expecting us.”

The Police Chief instructed that no pocket-torches should be used. He agreed with Chipstead; in that jungle of blackness the slightest gleam of light would show up with startling clearness.

“We had better separate and surround the place. The first to find a reasonable chance of entry to tell the rest.”

Fouquières agreed a second time and issued the order. If he felt any resentment at Chipstead taking over the command he gave no sign.

The grounds appeared extensive. They were



rank and foul with neglect. The grass rose in places knee high. In some places bushes formed a veritable barricade. Those gloves were still of splendid help. Made of the finest flexible steel mesh, they had saved his hands from laceration on the top of the wall. Every now and then, as he advanced, he could hear smothered oaths coming from the men to the right and left of him.

Presently he found himself alone. The others must have obeyed the order to spread themselves out. He had advanced in a straight line and now stood practically opposite what had been once the great entrance of the *château*. How many beautiful women must have passed there? In such a setting, Susan . . . Hell! he mustn't think of Susan now; he had work to do.

His mood had changed. Zest had come. Although the chances were that, through The Disguiser's damnable cunning, they were thrusting their heads into a trap, yet, somehow, he felt that his luck had changed. All through his life—not that he imagined he was different to anyone else—things ran like that. In cycles. There would be a period in which nothing would possibly go right. With so much luck knocking about the world not a single morsel came his way. How many times during the War had he cursed the ill-fated star under which some fool of a superstitious woman had once assured him he had been born . . .

But these barren stretches, in which it seemed that circumstances were conspiring to make a fool of him, were sometimes quickly succeeded by occasions, all too brief, of course—when he climbed almost to the top o' th' world. Glorious snatches of joy, these!

What was to be his luck that night? Good or bad? If good, he would be free to return to England the next day perhaps, to see Susan, to hold her in his arms . . . But if bad? He shook off from his face a crawling, slimy abomination, and gave that question no further thought. It was too dangerous.

He looked round, expecting to find Fouquières at his elbow, but he was still alone. He was rather glad; he wanted to do something on his own. A foolish thought, perhaps, but he still found it galling to realise that in this, the most important job of his career, he had been forced to call in outside help. True, he had paid Fouquières back in some measure, but—oh, well, it couldn't be helped.

He had reached a flag-stoned pathway by now. His feet slipped on the mouldy and uneven surface as he crossed it to get to the flight of steps which led up to the front door.

These steps, like the pathway, were slippery, being overgrown with the rank products of neglect. If he could have seen, Bunny knew they would have looked green and loathsome. Evidently they had not been used for a very long time.

The impression that, if there was an orthodox entrance to the château, this couldn't be the one, was confirmed when he reached the front door. The wood smelled unpleasant, and had the appearance of having grown in with the structure at either side. It would not give to pressure.

He must find another way, for this door could not be opened from the outside.

The return journey down the steps, brief as it was, called for special caution. A twisted or broken ankle now would be the very devil, and the chances of sustaining such a casualty were at least fifty-fifty.

He reached the bottom safely, however, and turning to the left, and keeping in the shadow of the wall, he found a sudden break in the masonry. The front steps must have been built over an archway.

It was so intensely dark in this confined space that he might have become blind. It was impossible to see anything. In order to feel more free, he took off his steel gloves and pushed them into his pocket. The groping fingers of his right hand touched what apparently was the handle of a door. This was possibly an entry into what had been the servants' quarters and lower regions of the château.

Would it yield?

His hand had tightened into a grip when there came a dramatic interruption. Someone

was approaching ; his ears had caught a sound of a footstep.

With instinctive quickness, he turned aside and, hugging the wall with his shoulders, pressed into a corner where the gloom was thickest. Soon a dark shape resolved itself.

The thought that the softly-stepping one might be an agent of Fouquières was soon dispelled. The man, walking forward unhesitatingly, rapped on the door three times. Barely a foot separated them. Bunny felt himself stifling because of the inability to breathe.

But he glowed with satisfaction. Fouquières had been doubly right : the château would yield something ; and, once action promised, he would forget everything else and be his old self again.

And now action *did* promise ! Those raps had a significance—there had been a longish pause between the first and second, but scarcely any wait between the second and third.

The sound of that last rap had scarcely died away when Bunny heard a sound as of a shutter being opened. He then saw revealed through a small grill the face of a man. This was illumined by the gleam of a lantern the man was holding up.

It was true, then, that there were people inside the château and that they took precaution to admit only those who were in their confidence. The few sentences that followed, evidently

secret passwords, were whispered so low that Bunny could not catch them. Then there was a pause and the shutter of the grille was closed down. Was the man to be admitted?

Not yet, evidently, for he was able to hear footsteps going away from the door.

Bunny now did some quick thinking. Luck was lending him some cards. There was only one way into the chateau and that was through this door—*which might soon be opened!* There must be one of two reasons why the man should be waiting. Either he was to be admitted after the doorkeeper had returned from apparently consulting with his superiors, or he was to be the recipient of a message. The former theory was equally likely.

A decision sharp and taut came into Bunny's mind: *He must enter in this man's place!* To do this, the other must be silenced. Immediately.

Using infinite care, Chipstead edged away from the wall to give himself more freedom. He was so close that he could smell the oil with which the fellow had anointed his hair.

He prepared for the struggle, which he intended should be sharp and brief, by leaning head and shoulders forward.

But, in the fraction of time before he struck, his whole nervous system was galvanised by a stifled scream of terror.

The sound died down as quickly as it rose,

but Bunny was certain of two facts. The first was that the call had come from a woman's lips, and the second was that it proceeded from the other side of the door.

## CHAPTER XXV

## FOUQUIERES PLAYS THE ACE

FROM the man who had knocked came the sound of a short, cynical laugh.

*"C'est la fille qui——"*

He got no further. The sentence was cut abruptly short, by a pair of very effective hands that swiftly commenced to choke all the remaining wind out of his lungs.

Bunny made a swift, clean job of it. He was a bit out of practice at this style of thing, but he earned himself full marks. When the man was insensible—Bunny did not stop to see if he had killed, and, after that laugh, he did not greatly care—he dragged the body away from the door, pulled off the wide-brimmed hat the man had been wearing and substituted it for his own dark felt. The whole action had not taken more than a minute.

He had barely composed himself, however, before the shutter of the grille rattled up.

"You are to see the Chief," muttered a

surly voice in French. "I have told him what you said."

Bunny nodded. For fear the man would recognise the difference in the two voices, he did not reply.

Bolts were withdrawn, a key turned and the door was opened. Directly Bunny was inside, the door was clanged to again and the bolts shot back. With the turning of the key, Bunny wondered what had happened to Fouquières and his men. The manner in which they had all disappeared was strange, almost uncanny. He had not heard a sound of any of them for several minutes.

"What are you waiting for?"

The man raised his lantern, took a long, searching look, and then his expression changed. Suspicion leaped suddenly into his eyes.

"W-h-o—are—you?" he spluttered.

Bunny again acted swiftly, for the other knew he was looking into the face of a complete stranger.

The blow, shrewdly aimed, landed on the man's jaw. He fell like a log, the lantern slipping from his hand and making a clatter as it fell to the ground. The light flickered out.

Bunny switched on his pocket electric torch, and made sure the man was really insensible.

Who was "The Chief," to whom the visitor he had knocked out was to be taken? And

where was he to be found? These questions demanded immediate answers.

Coming to the end of a wide stone-flagged passage smelling of damp and disuse, he took the turning that led to the right and found himself in another long corridor. This was different from the first, inasmuch as a number of doors opened off it.

"Formerly servants' rooms," Bunny told himself, and recalled the scream which had given such a jolt to his nervous system a few minutes previously. Was the woman—he was sure it was a woman who had screamed—imprisoned in one of these rooms?

There were six altogether and each one was empty.

Turning back, he reached, half-way down the corridor, the narrow, winding staircase he had noticed before opening the door of the third bedroom.

The steps were of stone and led up into another corridor, much wider than the one below, which stretched to right and left. Deciding to take the way to the right, Bunny started forward. Suddenly he stopped, his heart beating furiously. In front of him in the darkness was a figure. A face was reflected from under a broad-brimmed hat. This man was carrying an electric torch in his left hand and a revolver in his right. He was standing still, a short distance away, regarding him intently.



He raised his gun-hand and the man did the same. Then Bunny heard himself laughing—he was looking into a huge mirror and the man he had been on the point of shooting was himself!

To the left of the mirror was a bend in the corridor, and, following this, he came to a huge room that must have been a *salon* in the days when the Marquis de Malvail did his entertaining.

The great apartment was now a desert of dirt. The light from his torch showed that no furniture remained.

Was this a meeting-place for crooks? The Headquarters of a criminal like The Disguiser? Bunny was still pondering the problem when his attention was drawn to the further end of the room.

So well as he was able to see from that distance, the *salon* opened into another room at this point by means of a couple of doors. The top part of these were made of stained glass for a faint gleam percolated through. Was it in there that "The Chief" waited for the messenger whose place he had taken?

Under the impression that one of the doors was opening, he stepped quickly to one side, switching off his torch.

The door did open, and a man stepped out. So much Bunny was able to see by the light which shone faintly from the inner room.

The man was angry.

“Where’s that blasted fool?” he muttered fiercely. Then: “Gregoire!”

He started forward as though intent on finding the missing Gregoire, and, in order to screen himself better, Bunny stepped further into the shadow of the wall.

In moving back, his body became suddenly enveloped in a hideous clinging embrace—a Thing hung over him like a stifling shroud. He became a prisoner, for he dared not move. Had he been seen? And what foul agency had been chosen to incapacitate him?

In a few seconds that seemed an eternity he heard the door close—the man must have returned to the inner room.

He must free himself. The horror of the succeeding minute! For that which had enveloped him swooped silently, almost bearing him down. Choked and almost blinded, he crawled from beneath the debris, realising what had happened. A heavy curtain, filthy with the dust of years, had rotted away at the rings, and the weight of his body had brought it down. No light came from the window; it must be shuttered, he concluded, on the outside.

Wiping his face and neck with a handkerchief, Bunny allowed himself a brief breathing-space.

He did not stay inactive long, however. This business had to be cleared up; perhaps it was here that Bob Heddingly was being

kept a prisoner ; and he would get the truth out of that inner room.

Walking quietly to the door, Bunny stopped to listen. There was a low hum of voices.

Pushing the door gently open, he walked into the room. Unlike the *salon*, this was small. In the centre was a table. Five men were seated round this, there was one empty chair—and the man who was evidently presiding was “Pearson.” So much Bunny noticed in a glance.

“Please put your hands up ? ” he ordered.

The surprise reflected on the faces of the group was almost ludicrous. But they obeyed the command.

“Chipstead ! ” stammered the man Bunny knew as “Pearson.”

“Delighted to drop across you again, Mr. Pearson. You’ve got away rather neatly once or twice lately, but I may as well inform you that M. Fouquières, Chief of the Paris Secret Police, is in the vicinity and he has ten men with him. He will be here any minute.”

“Bluff ! ” commented Pearson. “What fools we are,” looking at the others, “to let this swine hold us all up ! ”

“The first one to move will be a fool,” came the warning, “he’ll get a bullet in his brain. Whilst we are waiting, there are one or two questions I want to put to you, Pearson.”

“Go to hell!” said the bogus Thames-street wholesale chemist.

“Sorry. I can’t oblige you for the moment; as you see, I’m engaged. The first question is: Where is our friend The Disguiser?”

Pearson laughed.

Bunny paid little attention to the laugh, but he wondered what had caused that look of hope to show itself so suddenly on the man’s face. He turned from Pearson to glance at the others. These, too, had an eager expression. What——?

He started to turn, but in the instant that he did so, his throat was gripped from behind. His head was snapped back, his windpipe gripped with brutal fierceness.

He was powerless to retaliate effectively; his hands merely beat the air. He tried to fire the revolver, but, struggling desperately, the first shot buried itself harmlessly in the ceiling. Then the rest were on him like a pack of wolves.

Ankles and wrists bound, he was placed against the opposite wall. “Pearson,” his face glowing with evil satisfaction, slapped the defenceless man in the face.

“You were a little too clever, Chipstead. How you got here I do not know, and I’m not going to bother now to find out, but it will be a trifle more difficult to leave—alive, I mean. of course,” he added. “To-night is full of

surprises. You certainly gave me one, and it's only fair to respond. Gregoire," turning to a man whose face was strange to the prisoner, "see if Mademoiselle is prepared to meet a visitor. Bring her along."

The man addressed made a smirking bow before moving to obey. It was then Bunny noticed the open panel in the opposite wall. This must have been the means by which this man who had attacked him from behind had entered the room. The fellow stepped into the opening and the panel closed after him.

Mademoiselle? Was this the girl he had heard scream? The girl he had endeavoured to find on his way upstairs? What were they doing with a girl?

He heard a sob, then his name called by a voice infinitely dear to him.

"Bunny! Oh, what have they done to you?"

It was Susan! She was standing just inside the room. She, then, was "Mademoiselle." It was her scream which he had heard. Susan. . . .

He could not speak. No words would come. She was as powerless as himself for, at a sign from "Pearson," three men rushed at her. With bonds round wrists and ankles, she was quickly placed by the side of Chipstead.

"I have just remarked to Mr. Chipstead, who popped in upon us quite unexpectedly, that this is a night of surprises." "Pearson's"

smirk, which had vanished, reappeared. "You must tell us later, Miss Courtenay, how you contrived to leave your—room. The gentleman who placed you in my charge would not be pleased to know that you had been disobedient to his wishes."

In order that he should not see the agony on Susan's face—by what devilish mischance had she allowed herself to be lured here?—Bunny looked straight in front. His eyes became fixed on that portion of the wall which contained the sliding panel.

This was moving!

There was no doubt about it. Inch by inch it opened. A hand appeared—a hand holding a revolver. Then a face. . . .

"*Fouquières!*" Bunny screamed.

The men who had been regarding Susan and himself with malicious content, swung round. "Pearson" ripped out a foul oath.

"*Fouquières* himself!" declared the Police Chief—"and not alone. *Entrez, mes enfants!*" So many men darted through the panel opening that the room was filled. They wasted no time; before the counterfeiters could recover from their astonishment, they were on them. Within five minutes the five were securely handcuffed.

*Fouquières* bowed like a favourite actor taking a curtain call.

"I play the ace, I think," he said. "But, *Mademoiselle*," with a glance at Susan whom

with Chipstead he had released himself, "one did not expect to encounter a lady; it is a surprise."

"This is a night of surprises," remarked Chipstead, with a glance at the fuming "Pearson"; "the chairman of this company has already remarked upon the fact."

Explanations came later. Susan's story was given preference. She told of the visit she had paid to the fisherman's cottage at Sandbanks, of her meeting there a clergyman who called himself the Rev. Ambrose Paignton—

"Who is The Disguiser, of course," she added, and Chipstead nodded: "I imagined as much," he commented. "Where is he now?"

"In London. He drugged me, and brought me over here by his private aeroplane so that I should be out of the way. He boasted about how easy everything had been, and then said what he was going to do." The rest of the story was so dramatic and sensational that neither of her audience made any further interruption.

"Do tell me I have been some good after all!" Susan pleaded when she had come to an end.

M. Fouquière, being a gallant gentleman, turned his head as Bunny made a movement with his arms.

The Police Chief's own story was quickly told. He had scattered his men, and had concentrated himself on trying to find a way into the château underground through a summer-house in the grounds. "I had heard a story concerning the Marquis associated with that summer-house," he explained to Chipstead.

"My search was unsuccessful. It was only after I had wasted much valuable time that one of my men came to say a large iron disc, used formerly as an inlet for coal, had been found. This luckily was an extra big one so that it permitted us in turn to squeeze through. By this means we reached the basement. Lying in a passage we saw a man slowly recovering from what had evidently been a knock-out blow and guessed that you, with characteristic daring, *mon ami*, had been before us. It was this man, who, yielding to a little quiet pressure, justifiable, I think, in the circumstances, was persuaded to tell us of a method of approach containing an element of surprise. On the way we encountered a member of the gang who we took care should not interfere with our plans."

"You mislaid another," said Chipstead; "he was a fellow named Gregoire, who had evidently brought some important information to the meeting—not that that matters now, I suppose. Anyway, it was a dramatic *coup, maître*. I congratulate you."



M. Fouquières bowed.

"But not so dramatic as something else I have in mind," he replied, "and this time it will be you who will play the ace."

CHAPTER XXVI      AN ASTONISHING AFFAIR IN  
WHITEHALL

DAVID McNALTY, just returned, rather the worse for wear, from an interview with that coldly contemptuous personage, Sir Horace Crepinger, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, stared as the commissionaire touched his hat.

"Sir Robert is back, Mr. McNalty," said the man with an air of suppressed excitement. Recalling the amazing letter which had arrived by that morning's post, signed "Chipstead," McNalty contented himself with a perfunctory: "Thank you, Simmonds—that's good news."

"He's looking queer, Mr. McNalty, as though he hadn't got over his last illness," pursued the commissionaire.

The Acting Chief of X2 passed on with a nod. Upstairs, in the big room overlooking Whitehall, he was greeted by a man whose appearance bore out the hall-porter's words.

“Surprised to see me, no doubt,” said Sir Robert Heddingly in a low, faint voice. “I haven’t time to give you a full explanation now—this confounded Secret Service Conference starts this afternoon and I don’t know the first thing about it. Bring me all the files and any other information. Then I shall want a synopsis of all that has happened in the Department since I have been away . . . Oh, God! my head!” He broke off to clasp his forehead.

“I can’t stand the light in my eyes; have my desk moved at once, please. Then—all the papers; especially the new code books. I have a tremendous lot to do.”

“Yes, Sir Robert,” replied McNalty respectfully.

After the desk had been moved, he re-read Bunny Chipstead’s letter, and permitted himself a rich, ripe oath.

“Well, I’ll be hoojered!” he declared.

M. Hennequin, accredited representative of France to the Secret Service Conference of the Allied Powers, entered the room with a flourish typically Gallic. This man, famous for his icy efficiency, could expand like a flower on occasion, it would seem.

“*Mon cher confrere!*” he cried delightedly; “what pleasure to meet you again! We are to work together, you and I, in the future—is that not one of the reasons for this

Conference which is to begin so soon? How many minutes have we?"

Sir Robert Heddingly eyed his visitor coldly. Perhaps it was the Gallic flourish he did not like; in any case, his reception was not remarkable for cordiality.

"Very few. The Conference starts at three o'clock. Of course, the Foreign Office is only a short distance away." Then, grudgingly, in a voice that had become appreciably stronger, he added: "It was very nice of you to look me up beforehand, M. Hennequin."

The Frenchman deprecated the thanks with an eloquent gesture of immaculately-gloved hands.

"Have we, in Paris, not heard of your so unfortunate recent illness, Sir Robert? And have we not all sympathised so deeply with you? Your attention, if you please: Monsieur le President himself asked me to call in person to offer you his warmest personal regards. Then there was also M. Fouquières—you know Fouquières, of course?"

"Of course." Despite Hennequin's undeniable personal charm and the kindly sentiments the visitor expressed, Sir Robert Heddingly's manner did not undergo any appreciable change. It almost seemed as though he would like to be rid of him.

M. Hennequin affected not to notice any restraint.

"Ah! I will tell you a good joke so that

you shall laugh and forget yourself, Sir Robert," he continued. "You do not know what they have been saying in Paris? No, of course not! You have been—forgive me—out of your mind, is it not so?" Before Heddingly could utter any protest, he had gone on: "Others were saying that you had been captured by a desperate criminal who calls himself The Disguiser! *Ma foi*, what a story! As if The Disguiser—we know that one in France—were he still alive, would escape *me!*" The speaker, in his enthusiasm, stretched out his hand and laid it on the shoulder of the man he was addressing.

Heddingly, startled, quickly recoiled.

Hennequin laughed.

"I apologise. I forgot you are still a sick man! I should have known better. I was carried away. That man who calls himself The Disguiser has many crimes to his record, as you must know yourself, Sir Robert, and were he alive I would hunt him down remorselessly as I would a poisonous snake."

Heddingly spoke harshly.

"It was an absurd story about my being kidnapped. Who told you that?"

"Why who else but your great friend Chipstead—he whom they call *le petit lapin*. I saw him in Paris; he was in great grief. He almost wept. 'If The Disguiser has Sir Robert in his power, I am helpless,' he said—'that crook is too clever for me.'"

“But didn't you tell him The Disguiser was dead?”

“Of course! But he would not believe me. He said he knew the man was still living—and carrying on business as head of an extremely clever gang of forgers.” The speaker narrowed his eyes on the man he addressed.

“Really? He seems to have developed an obsession about this particular crook,” Heddingly's words were edged with a sneer. “But it is getting late—I must be going.”

Hennequin laughed restrainedly.

“It distresses me to have to inform you, Monsieur Coquerel, that you will not be permitted to leave this room,” he said. Already his back was against the door leading to the corridor.

Heddingly's face became convulsed.

“Who are you calling ‘Coquerel?’” he asked; “are you mad?”

“No—merely fortunate. It happens that I too share my friend Chipstead's belief that The Disguiser is alive—and that he is far too dangerous a personality to be allowed to remain at liberty.” The speaker raised his eyebrows a fraction as he spoke and the revolver which the other had flashed from his pocket was knocked out of his hand by someone who had entered silently from the inner room.

“My God, Bunny, that was a near squeak!” declared McNalty.

“I had him cornered all the time from my coat-pocket . . . Now, M. Paul Coquerel, *alias* Sir Robert Heddingly *alias* The Disguiser, I’ll trouble you to put your hands up!”

“Chipstead!”

“At your service! I have to compliment you upon the idea—with Heddingly tucked safely away, you intended to utilise your undoubted powers of disguise by taking his place at this Secret Service Conference. It required nerve and skill, and, as I say, I compliment you. In view of your subsequent activities, all the best secrets of the British Intelligence System would no doubt have been useful. The mistake you made was in having Jacob Larouche murdered in Hyde Park. Murder is a nasty trade and all your troubles dated from then. Also you should have had more discretion than to boast to Miss Courtenay. Grave errors, these, Coquerel.

“I should like to remind you,” went on Chipstead, after a short pause, “that kidnapping is another serious offence. The man you have been impersonating is still missing. It will be necessary for you, of course, to tell me immediately where you have placed Heddingly. And I’ll add this: in the ordinary way you would be handed over to the proper authorities, but if anything has happened to Sir Robert, I’ll deal with you first myself. The treatment won’t be pleasant. Now . . .

Answer that, Mac——” Chipstead broke off as the telephone-bell shrilled.

In the fraction of time that elapsed between the two words “now” and “answer,” Coquerel leapt. But, quick as he was, Bunny was quicker; the plunging body of the crook was straightened out by a beautiful left swing. The Disguiser rocked on his heels and then crashed on the floor of the office, the secrets of which he had made such an audacious bid to secure.

“That saves a lot of bother,” commented Chipstead. McNalty, possessed by some quite exceptional excitement, was still at the telephone.

“Hello, Matthews, Mr. Chipstead’s here; wait a minute,” shouted McNalty into the ‘phone, and then to Bunny: “He’s found the Chief—the real one, I mean.”

Bunny seized the receiver.

“Chipstead here,” he announced crisply.

“This is Matthews,” came a rather faint voice from the other end. “I am speaking from a village in the New Forest called Burley. Sir Robert is receiving attention from a local doctor. He has been kept a prisoner in a house here—I am bringing him back straight away. It’s been a funny business.”

“Congratulations, old man! You sound as though you’ve had a roughish time.”

“I have—rather.”

“ Well, this may buck you up ; we’ve got The Disguiser ! ”

“ What ? ”

“ We’ve got The Disguiser.”

“ Where ? ”

“ In the office. At the moment he’s stretched out on the carpet sound asleep.”

“ Good God ! ” came fervently over the wire.

Matthews’ further report was short but dramatic. Feigning illness, (“ my groans must have been pretty realistic ”) he had induced the mute to bend over him, had caught the man’s throat with both hands, and, after a strenuous struggle, had managed to overpower the fellow. Then he made search for his Chief. He found Sir Robert in a basement room similar to the one in which he had been placed. Heddingly was in a bad way through incessant nervous strain.

Armed with the revolver which he had taken from the mute, Matthews had no difficulty in overawing the two men who acted as servants in the house ; in fact, directly these learned that the mute (whom they evidently hated as well as feared) was confined behind a locked door, they incontinently bolted. As Matthews and his charge walked into the village they were met by the local police-constable and the Bournemouth garage-proprietor from whom Matthews had borrowed the Delage. Explanations having been given and accepted, the X2



men returned to Bournemouth and then took train to London.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Well, my boy, I am very grateful to you——” said Heddingly.

“And all that sort of thing,” scoffed Chipstead.

A fortnight had passed since that astonishing affair in Whitehall. Sir Robert Heddingly, Susan Courtenay and Bunny Chipstead were having dinner at the Crillon. In the morning they were to leave Paris for the sun-lapped South.

“Bunny, listen to what father has to say.” Susan’s rebuke was delightful to hear.

“You were about to bestow upon me the freedom of the city; many thanks, Bob.”

“I was about to do nothing of the sort, you ass!” declared the now happily-recovered Heddingly; “I was merely going to ask you one or two further questions.”

“Ask away. Only I hope you don’t mind me feeding; this sole is delicious.”

Susan dimpled.

“Coarse creature! Go on, Daddy.”

“We know that the cleric you met on the *Aquitania*, and who called himself the Rev. Ambrose Paignton, was Coquerel.”

“Well?”

“With The Disguiser on the Atlantic, who was it telephoned to Susan—my dear, you

really should have told me!—using his name? ‘Pearson’—whom we know now to be the notorious Fevrier?”

“Of course. You mustn’t forget that friend Fevrier, whom I personally had not had the previous pleasure of meeting, was no particular pal of yours, Bob, owing to the Clerquiet affair. The Disguiser had gone to America in connection with his forging operations, of course. Any other knots?”

“The Sandbanks fisherman was another member of the gang, I take it?”

“Undoubtedly. Why, Susan discovered that! Good little girl, Susan!”

“You almost make me blush, Bunny—come and dance.”

When they returned Susan’s eyes were radiant.

“Do you know what this dreadful man has done, Daddy?” she asked; “he’s—he’s proposed to me!”

Sir Robert looked wise, and, like most sages, said little.

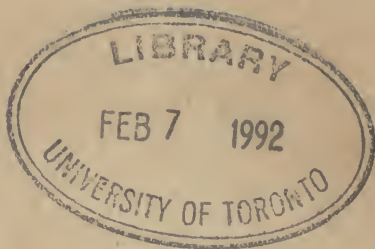
“Well, kiss him, can’t you?” he replied.

THE END









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